Manifest Covariance

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Manifest Covariance

by justheretoreadhannibalfics

Summary

Will Graham has a knack for psychology, and picked the psychiatrist he wants to work for. His only obstacle so far had been the fact that he has wolf ears and a tail, showing everyone he's what's considered one of the most dangerous creatures that pretends to be human.

But his new employer is actually unperturbed by this fact, and welcomes him to the office warmly.

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1

Werewolves weren't that unusual. They weren't even really feared or stigmatized that much anymore.

That was good. That all helped Will in his life, as he did his best to fit in and not make anyone think he was a monster.

What was unusual, even for a werewolf, was being what they called a *manifest* wolf.

Will, having the misfortune of being just such a creature, sported a tail and a set of floppy brown ears, even in human form.

And that certainly did little to help him keep to the shadows.

Being manifest, Will was working by a slightly different set of rules than most wolves. He didn't *have* to transform during a full moon, though he preferred to. He could actually transform outside of the lunar cycle's optimal timing, though it was a bit tiring. He could also change into a more harmless version of himself, just a shaggy dog, if he wanted to.

There were a lot of advantages to his condition, which Will tried to mostly keep to himself when he could. He helped whenever he could, because he wanted to be useful, but he didn't want to be taken advantage of.

There were some huge inconveniences as well, which Will kept a secret with the intention of keeping them to his grave.

But Will was doing a pretty good job living a normal life despite this all. He had graduated from college and was about to interview for a job as an assistant to a well known psychiatrist. He hadn't let his condition get in his way, nor had he allowed it to give him any unfair advantages over his peers. He didn't want to be better than anyone, and he didn't want anyone to think he was. He just wanted to be normal.

"Will Graham."

Will felt his ears perk up at the sound of his name, though he had been trying his best to suppress the instinctual response in himself. The accented voice that spoke from the doorway was actually very nice, the words feeling smoother and softer than most.

Will stood up and walked over to where the man stood. He did his best to smile warmly and offered his hand as he forced himself to make eye contact. The man smelled nice as well, the cologne he was wearing not so strong that it would sting his nose.

"A pleasure to meet you," the man said, smiling politely, "I confess I have been anxiously awaiting your interview."

Will tipped his head, letting his eyes drop down to the man's tie, away from his dark eyes.

“I should hope that’s a good thing, sir,” Will said, desperately hoping he wasn’t going to make a fool of himself.

“Of course,” the man said, gesturing for Will to come through the door with him, “I have contacted your references, and spoken with the professors who had the pleasure of teaching you. I am incredibly impressed.”

Will felt a blush warm his face, and his tail gave one traitorous wag that he prayed went unnoticed. He had worked in jobs before where he knew for a fact the references and teachers had never been contacted, and it gave him a sort of thrill to know this would be different.

“Thank you, sir,” Will said, feeling awkward.

“Please,” the man said, taking a seat and waving toward the other, “call me Hannibal.”

Will blinked in surprise as he took his seat. He hadn’t expected to be interviewed by the man himself. He had expected someone else, at least at first, then maybe a follow up interview where he would finally meet the man. But here he was, Doctor Lecter, telling Will to call him Hannibal.

That wasn’t the only thing that was odd about this all. Will had expected the man to sit behind his desk for the interview, but they were sitting with nothing as a barrier between them. Almost as if they were equals.

“Thank you,” Will said, unsure how to respond to that, “I’m glad you are impressed with me, at least before we’ve actually spoken.”

It was an attempt at a joke, to ease the tension in his own chest. At the slight turn of Lecter’s lips, marking a true smile, Will felt some of the tension lift.

“Indeed. I would almost venture to say that you are overqualified for this position.”

Will’s heart sank. That was the preamble to rejection. He had heard it often enough from others that he had grown to fear hearing those exact words.

“Which leads me to wonder,” Lecter continued, “why you want it. You could very likely work for the FBI, or become certified as a psychiatrist in your own right.”

Will wanted to fidget, but he suppressed the urge.

“Forgive me, sir,” Will ventured, “but if I am to be honest with you, I don’t want to be anything so fantastic. I am working to be seen as normal by others, and excelling at anything could make that more difficult.”

Lecter huffed a soft laugh, making Will feel a bit better. He at least didn’t think Will was being rude.

“Fascinating,” Lecter said, and he sounded as if he really meant it, “Many others in your unique position would endeavor to prove their superiority, rather than hide their uniqueness.”

Will shrugged, feeling slightly anxious about this not being exactly a normal interview. He hadn't prepared for this line of questioning.

"I don't want to be better than anyone," Will said, "I just want to live my life."

Lecter nodded.

"Will, you have the job," he said with a smile, "I have no further questions for you, so as long as you would still like to work with me, I would like that as well."

Will blinked in surprise, his ears flattening back against his skull in apprehension. That definitely wasn't normal.

"Sir?" he asked, sure there had to be something wrong.

"I do have one condition upon your employment," Lecter replied.

Will nodded, still confused.

"Call me Hannibal."

Will laughed, unable to help it. It was just so absurd. His laugh was short, and barking, making him cover his mouth in embarrassment.

"I'm sorry," Will said quickly, "I just feel like this isn't normally how job interviews go, especially for you. You haven't even asked me about my work experience or anything, like most employers would. I can't help but find that odd."

Lecter nodded, though he didn't seem perturbed by Will's laugh, nor his response.

"You are correct, Will," Lecter said, "I would normally have quite the vetting process for anyone hoping to be hired. The truth is that I like you. I very rarely like anyone so quickly, so consider it fate, or whatever you will. Does that make you uncomfortable?"

Will hesitated.

"I actually don't know how to feel about that," he admitted, "I mean, I'm flattered, but I feel like that sort of puts the pressure on me to continue being someone you like."

Lecter shook his head.

"I do not make decisions hastily, nor will I decide to go back on this one unless you prove to be incompetent. I don't believe you will, which is why I am confident with my decision."

Will ducked his head shyly and shrugged.

"Alright. Sounds like I have a job, then. When do I start?" he asked.

"Tomorrow, if you can," Lecter replied pleasantly.

His voice really was very nice. Will hadn't met many people whose voices didn't grate on his nerves. Lecter's was smooth and low and round. Will liked it very much, and he found himself actually excited to start working with him.

"I can do that," Will said, nodding. His tail gave another wag despite his attempts to keep it still.

Lecter smiled.

Will Graham was entirely fascinating. Werewolves usually had a tendency to be dominant over others, or try to be. They were known for being aggressive in their pursuits, stubborn, and somewhat intimidating. *Manifest* wolves were said to be exponentially so.

Will was none of these things.

He was demure, soft spoken, content to dwell on the sidelines, and (dare Hannibal say it) cute. Will's bright blue eyes and floppy brown ears were naturally endearing, especially paired with his soft-looking tail. His mannerisms as well, tipping his head and swishing his tail absently, contributed to the adorable appearance.

Hannibal wouldn't normally consider these things, beyond aesthetics, but Will was so much more than just his appearance. Before meeting Will, Hannibal had truly done his homework. He had been intrigued by a manifest applying to his practice, and had wanted to know why.

Will was objectively brilliant. He had studied psychology, forensics, and chemistry in college, and had made it through each and every course with flying colors. There was only one professor who had anything bad to say about the young man, and he was distasteful himself. Hannibal had taken his business card after speaking with him, disregarding what he had said about Will.

And despite all his accomplishments and brilliance, Will just wanted to be seen as *ordinary*.

Hannibal hoped he would be able to influence Will to abandon that desire on behalf of the much more enjoyable option of fulfilling his potential.

2

Will entered the building, feeling even more apprehension than he had the day before. He plucked at the collar of his shirt nervously, worrying over his appearance.

Today, he would be meeting actual clients of Lecter's. Despite the Doctor already liking him, for whatever reason, Will worried about what the clients would think when they saw him. He had to consciously keep his tail from tucking between his legs as he found his way to the desk Lecter had shown him.

Everything was set up, and Will blinked in surprise when he saw a small placard with his name on it, already set at the front of the desk. He hadn't expected that.

Will shook it off and started getting ready for the day. He went over Lecter's schedule, memorizing it so he could help any prospective clients who happened to call or walk in. He made sure he knew where everything was, so he wouldn't be left digging around when he needed something.

It seemed he was the first one in today, which he had expected. He had come exceptionally early in order to avoid traffic and to get a head start on anything he might need to do in the office. He liked the quiet, and he knew that if he could keep the job long enough, he would grow to really love this early morning time.

Will's ear twitched when he heard a car pull up to the building. He hadn't expected for anyone to show up this early, even Lecter himself. It was very early.

The door opened, and Will smelled the man before he saw him fully. He still smelled like that nice, subtle cologne from the day before.

"Good morning, Doctor Lecter," Will greeted, trying to look more cheerful than startled. He smiled at the man as he walked in, hoping to show how happy he was to be there.

"Good morning, Will," Lecter said, "but call me Hannibal, please."

Lecter began to take off his overcoat and gloves, and Will scurried over to help him if he could. He wasn't sure if he was supposed to, being his assistant, but it felt like something he should at least offer to do.

"I confess I am surprised to see you here already," Lecter said, smiling as he let Will take his coat, "My habit is to be here so early in the morning that very few others are about."

Will huffed a soft laugh, turning to hang up the coat for Lecter.

"Mine too," he said, "I like to be able to be ready before anyone else shows up. That was me all through college, and with all my other jobs. I end up being so early people call me crazy for it. I like the quiet of early morning, too, so I'll usually be here before you, unless you don't want me to be."

Lecter hummed thoughtfully, letting Will take his gloves and fold them into the pocket of the coat for him.

“I see no reason that should be a problem,” Lecter said, “but if it ever is, I will be sure to let you know.”

Will nodded, feeling a bit awkward standing there now that he didn’t have anything to keep his hands busy. Lecter wasn’t making any move to head into his office, and Will could feel his gaze heavily.

“Uh, thanks,” Will said, taking that moment to head back to the desk. His ears and tail were twitching nervously, and he wished he didn’t have things like that giving him away all the time. “Is there anything else you need right now, Hannibal?”

Will felt wrong saying his first name like that. Hannibal was his boss, and he shouldn’t be so casual with him. But Lecter had specifically asked for him to call him by it.

“Not at the moment, no,” Hannibal said, seeming a bit disappointed by that fact, “If I think of anything, I won’t hesitate to ask. Go ahead and make yourself comfortable.”

Will nodded, trying for another smile, though he worried it didn’t come off as genuine. He wasn’t very good at smiling usually. Lecter accepted it with a polite nod as he walked into his office and shut the door behind himself.

Will let out a soft sigh of relief. He had made it through the first morning without completely making a fool of himself. Lecter seemed to like him well enough, however long that would last. Will was just glad to be there. He hoped he would be able to prove he was valuable, at least enough to make up for his oddities so he wouldn’t get fired.

Will could hear Lecter moving around in his office, taking a book down from a shelf and flipping through a few pages before he put it back and sat at his desk. Will heard the soft scratch of a pencil on paper, and he smiled to himself. He allowed his tail a few happy swishes as he got back to familiarizing himself with his work space.

Lecter had said there might be some times when Will would be asked to do something that hadn’t been covered in the position description, but that didn’t worry him too much. Will was good at learning quickly and adapting to his environment, so he was confident that he would be able to handle anything the psychiatrist could throw at him.

The first patient walked in exactly one minute before their scheduled appointment time, and Will smiled as he introduced himself. He signed them in and asked them to take a seat as he quickly made a note of their presence and moved on to filling out some paperwork Hannibal had given him.

At the precise time their appointment was to start, Lecter opened the door and ushered them in. He offered Will a polite nod before he closed the door for the session.

Will happily got back to his work, smiling to himself as he did. The first day was going well so far, and he was planning to keep it that way.

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“Will, what are your plans for lunch?” Hannibal asked, emerging from his office at noon and walking up to the desk where Will was sitting.

Will looked up and tipped his head. His tail had been swishing lazily in a content motion, but now it stilled.

“Don’t know,” he said with a shrug, “probably going to just head out and find somewhere to grab some food before I come back.”

That was the wrong answer. Hannibal couldn’t abide by that.

Hannibal frowned and shook his head sharply.

“Nonsense,” he said, “I’ll cook for you.”

Will startled a bit at that. He looked up at Hannibal with wide eyes, looking for all the world like a lost puppy. Absurdly, it made Hannibal want to scoop him up and protect him.

“Sir?” he asked, bewildered.

“Hannibal,” Hannibal corrected, “and I insist. I have the feeling you would opt for fast food, and that simply will not do. You should be more careful with what you put into your body.”

Will’s ears dropped in confusion, and his nose scrunched a bit.

“Alright,” he conceded, “but only this once. I’ll bring my own lunches from now on so you don’t worry about it.”

Hannibal felt a bit disappointed by that, but he just nodded. It would be good enough for now.

Will insisted on helping Hannibal with his coat and gloves again. Hannibal had never intended for Will to do this kind of thing, but he found it so endearing and sweet of him that he couldn’t say anything about it. The way Will fussed and made sure to be doing his job as well as he could was admirable and cute.

Hannibal realized he had quickly grown attached to his new assistant, but he couldn’t find it in himself to consider that a bad thing.

Hannibal took Will to his home, seeing the nervousness it was all instilling in the young man. He hoped he would be able to make Will more comfortable with him, but he knew he would have to be careful to not come off as creepy to him.

“I am very careful about what I put into my own body,” Hannibal said, taking Will’s coat this time, as they were in his home now, “which means I do most of my own cooking. I also have quite a refined palette, so I have learned some quite complex recipes.”

Will just nodded along with what Hannibal was saying, looking a bit dazed by it all. Hannibal wondered if perhaps he was overwhelming the young man. It would be just like him to try

too much too fast. He often had grandiose ideas that were not shared by his company.

“Please let me know if I make you uncomfortable in any way,” Hannibal offered, hoping to give Will a lifeline if it was needed. He didn’t want to spook the young man.

Will’s eyes snapped up to meet his, and his ears perked up a bit at being addressed.

“Oh, no, of course,” Will said, stumbling over the words slightly, “I suppose I’m just a bit… amazed by it all. You’re not really how I expected you to be. This isn’t exactly how most employers treat their employees.”

Hannibal nodded, smiling a bit. He felt somewhat relieved by that. Will wasn’t frightened. He was just adjusting as he recalibrated his expectations.

“Indeed,” Hannibal agreed, “I think you may find me odd in many ways, though I hope they are all good in your perception. I see no reason we cannot be friendly with each other. I enjoy cooking for my friends.”

Will’s tail swished happily, though Will quickly shifted and stilled it. He seemed self-conscious about its movements, likely feeling they betrayed his thoughts more than he would like. Hannibal thought it was lovely.

“You have lucky friends, if your cooking is as good as you say it is,” Will replied, looking a bit more comfortable.

Hannibal smiled.

“You will have to let me know if they are truly lucky, then,” he said, “as I have a clear bias.”

Will hummed in thought, leaning forward a bit as he sniffed the air.

“You make it sound like I don’t feel obligated to like your food,” he noted, “which would be neglectful of you, doctor. I’m indebted to you for feeding me, even if you don’t see it that way.”

Hannibal was very pleased with Will. He was clever and adorable. This was terribly dangerous for Hannibal to allow himself to entertain.

3

Hannibal's cooking was astronomically good. Will had genuinely never tasted anything as good as Hannibal's food before in his life. So, even if Will hadn't felt obligated to compliment his host on the food, he would not have felt any reservations in doing so.

"I'm not exactly an expert on cuisine," Will said, "seeing as I got through college on cup noodles and canned food, but this is seriously the best thing I have ever eaten."

Will could see that Hannibal was preening under the praise, but he figured it was well-earned. Will was having a hard time not making audible sounds of appreciation every time he took a bite, and he knew his tail was betraying him in full as it waved excitedly behind him through the entire meal.

"Expert or not, your opinion matters," Hannibal said, "especially seeing as you are my guest."

Will shrugged, but continued to eat happily. He definitely wasn't going to complain about anything. Hannibal seemed to really just enjoy having company to eat with, and Will was grateful for the real food. He hadn't been excited at the prospect of fast food, but he had been willing to do it anyway.

But he was going to have to come up with food he could bring with him now, so he wouldn't impose on Lecter more than this once.

"So, where's your accent from, Doctor Lecter?" Will asked, hoping it wasn't rude.

If Lecter's smile was anything to go by, he didn't consider it to be rude at all.

"I am natively from Lithuania," he answered, "but I imagine my accent is a bit of a mix, as I travelled much in my youth."

Will nodded. He had thought as much, since he couldn't pinpoint exactly where it was from himself, but he hadn't wanted to assume he knew better than anyone by guessing.

"What brought you to the states?" he asked, wanting so badly for the man to continue liking him. He hadn't met many people he had actually cared to be liked by, but something about Lecter was drawing him in.

"A family matter, at first," Lecter said, seeming to enjoy the conversation well enough, "though I stayed through medical school and have not felt the need to move on yet."

Will smiled.

"I've also been meaning to ask about that," he said, "you used to be a surgeon, but you left it for psychiatry. Why is that?"

Lecter huffed a softly amused laugh.

“You are quite a curious creature, aren’t you?” he mused, “I see you have done your research into me, just as I have done for you.”

Will felt a blush creep up his neck to his cheeks, and his tail curled under his chair. He hadn’t meant to bombard the man with questions, really. He was just so interested in it all. He had never been out of the states, and psychology was one of his passions, so he was interested to learn about what had drawn the other man to be in the same place at the same time as Will.

“I am not displeased by it,” Hannibal reassured him quickly, “I find it rather pleasant, actually. The questions you pose are not the kind I am usually met with, so I find conversation with you to be refreshing. To answer your question, one too many of my patients died, and I decided to focus on the healing of the mind rather than the body.”

Will’s ears perked up a bit, and he managed to glance up at Hannibal. The man really didn’t seem upset at all, which was a relief.

“What do most people ask you?” he said, then quickly amended, “unless that’s a question that would annoy you.”

Hannibal shook his head with a smile.

“Not at all. I am most often asked about my cooking, though the conversation shifts depending on the atmosphere. When at the opera, I am asked for my thoughts on the performance, and so forth. The only person who has recently truly asked me about myself was someone I did not wish to tell.”

Will tipped his head curiously.

“Oh. I guess that makes sense,” he said carefully, “but you don’t mind that I’m asking? We only met yesterday, and I’m your assistant.”

Hannibal took a bite of food as he considered that.

“As I said before, I genuinely like you,” Hannibal replied, “so I consider this us getting to know each other. That being said, I do have a few questions for you. Consider it somewhat of an exchange. A quid pro quo.”

Will scrunched his nose a bit, feeling like that was odd wording, but he shrugged. He couldn’t think of anything Hannibal might ask that he wouldn’t want to answer, and he didn’t think the man would begrudge him if he did decide not to reply.

“Alright, fire away,” Will said, taking his own bite, though he had far less food left on his plate than the doctor.

He had been trying not to eat so quickly, but the food was so amazing it was difficult. At least Hannibal didn’t seem to mind.

“What enticed you to pursue an education in psychology?” Hannibal asked.

Will’s ears perked up immediately, and his tail swished excitedly. Hannibal could see the young man was having to refrain from scarfing the food down in an unseemly matter, which was both flattering and endearing. His reaction to the question seemed to show he truly had a passion for the subject.

“I’ve always had an interest in psychology,” Will explained, setting his silverware down as he smiled up at Hannibal, “when I was in the seventh grade, I found a beginner’s course online. It was like a class that I could watch, and I memorized every episode to the point where I could recite them in full from memory.”

Will was nearly glowing as he spoke about it, apparently remembering the experience fondly.

“I had to coax the high school to let me into AP Psychology as a sophomore, since usually only seniors took it,” Will continued pleasantly, “There were always a couple juniors, but it was unheard of for a sophomore to take it. I actually kinda wish I had taken the intro course first, because there wasn’t another psychology class offered by the high school for me to take the next year.”

Hannibal raised an eyebrow.

“You passed the AP test, I presume,” he said, “quite an accomplishment for someone so young.”

Will grinned.

“It was probably the easiest class I took in high school,” he said, “even though it wasn’t the only AP class I took. I’ve always had a knack for psychology. Something about it just clicks.”

Hannibal smiled.

It was clear Will didn’t often allow himself to feel pride for himself. The fact that he allowed himself to meant two things to Hannibal. One: Will truly did enjoy psychology as a subject. Two: Will felt comfortable enough with Hannibal at this point to show his true feelings about it to him.

One sure way to see someone at their best was to get them talking about their passion, and Will was radiant.

“It must have felt something like fate, when you discovered your talent for the subject,” Hannibal said, “the universe aligning to give you something that could be yours alone. An understanding that is unique and exceptional.”

Will’s cheeks turned pink, and his tail waved so fast through the air that a few herbs on the wall behind him began to shift in the breeze it created. Hannibal wished he had a sketchbook on hand so he could capture the way Will looked just then.

“I don’t really believe in fate,” Will said, his ears twitching a bit, “At least not in the sense that ours has been decided for us. I think we make our own destinies, that each of our choices

alter the path slightly, and we end up where we have led ourselves."

Will paused after saying it all, his ears laying back against his head a bit and his tail curling under the chair uncertainly.

"Sorry," Will said, "I've always been told I think too much. I make people uncomfortable."

Hannibal blinked in surprise.

Will was possibly the first person to offer intelligent conversation with Hannibal without only hoping to earn his good graces. Not to mention, Hannibal couldn't imagine ever telling someone that they think too much. At least not when their mind was as beautifully developed as Will's.

"Nonsense," Hannibal said, "never apologize to me for your intelligence. So many of my acquaintances fear upsetting me so much they refuse to voice their opinions to me. I value honesty in all things, even when you may feel you are disagreeing with me. I can only learn if I am told when I am wrong."

Will's blush deepened, and Hannibal found it so attractive on him he set his mind to make Will blush whenever possible. He would only do so with pleasant things, of course, because he felt Will had already been taken for granted enough in his life.

"I guess most people think you don't have much to learn, then," Will said, seeming a bit hesitant to say it, as if it might offend Hannibal in some way.

Hannibal smiled.

"I hope you would not do me that disservice, Will," he replied, absolutely pleased with Will for everything. He was charming, and so very intelligent. Hannibal just wanted to nurture his beautiful mind and see what blossomed from it. "If perfection is stagnation, then heaven is a swamp. No man has perfect knowledge of anything."

Will grinned, and his tail swished again.

"My Latin teacher always said that exact thing," he said, "she never let us get away with thinking we were done learning. I'm glad you're that kind of person."

Hannibal nodded. He was glad, too, if it meant Will thought more of him. He knew there would be things that he would have to make up for in the young man's eyes sometime in the future, and getting a head start wasn't a bad idea.

4

Will snapped his head up when he heard the door open, and he smiled when he saw Hannibal walk into the office. He knew his tail would be wagging unashamedly as well, but he didn't mind it as much now. The first few weeks had gone off without a hitch, and Hannibal really seemed to like him.

"Good morning, Doctor Lecter," Will said, walking over to take his coat for him.

"Good morning, Will," Hannibal said with a smile, "I trust you are well."

Will was about to respond when he caught an unfamiliar scent and he chuffed instinctively. It was the smell of death, and he shook his head without thinking about it first.

"Uh, yeah, I'm fine," he said distractedly, "but Hannibal, I hope this isn't rude to ask, but, where have you been?"

Hannibal tipped his head curiously at Will, and Will realized that might have been the wrong way to phrase it. He took in a deep breath, affirming his suspicions about the smell.

"You smell like a morgue, no offense," he explained.

Understanding dawned in Hannibal's expression and he smiled.

"Can you put together where I have been from my scent alone?" he asked, angling his body slightly towards Will, as if inviting Will to smell him again.

Will did. He leaned forward, careful not to brush up against Hannibal's expensive suit as he closed his eyes and took another deep breath.

Definitely a morgue. There was decay, and chemicals. But there were other people, live ones. Cologne and printer ink, cheap coffee and vapor rub.

"My best guess would be a crime lab," Will said, pulling back and looking up at Hannibal, "so there were bodies, but also people working on them and doing tests. The vapor rub is what they use to overpower the scent of decay so they can work."

Hannibal grinned, his eyes shining with interest.

"Correct. As it so happens, the FBI has asked me to consult on a criminal profile," he said, "I'm impressed with your acute sense of smell. I imagine it may even be more sensitive than my own, though I suppose that should not be a surprise."

Will smiled, but ducked his head shyly.

"Yeah. One of the few perks," he said with a shrug, "or not, depending on the circumstances. How did it go? The profiling, I mean."

Hannibal nodded as Will hung the coat up.

“It went as well as can be expected,” he said, “Agent Crawford wants answers that I cannot give him. While I am glad to help, it can be exasperating to work with people such as that at times.”

Will nodded, turning to head back to the desk.

“I understand that. If you need someone to tell him you’re too busy, have him call me. I can make up however many appointments you want in order to get him off your back,” Will said with a smile, “I can be frustratingly persuasive when the fancy strikes.”

Hannibal chuckled softly. Will liked to earn a real laugh from the man, because he so often only showed his amusement through his eyes. But Will was starting to learn the way around the man’s interests, and could get true laughter out of him every now and then.

“I dread to think,” Hannibal said, “though perhaps I should bring you with me the next time I consult for him. I can’t imagine you would be anything other than helpful for the investigation, and then I could turn you loose on Jack if he begins to bother me.”

Will laughed, feeling his cheeks get warm at the idea. He couldn’t quite explain it, but the thought of Hannibal bringing him along, even just as his assistant, to something so important, and giving him the chance to voice his own thoughts and opinions, and then relying on Will to be there if an agent became difficult, it was actually pleasant.

“I’d be honored,” Will replied with a grin, “but I’m sure you’re perfectly capable of taking care of yourself. No need for me to go with you just to play second fiddle.”

Hannibal hummed in thought, making his way to the door of his office as Will organized the paperwork he was planning to do that day.

“Perhaps you would reconsider,” Hannibal said, “I think you would be able to offer some valuable insight, and multiple educated perspectives can be greatly advantageous for this type of work.”

Will opened his mouth to reply to that when his phone rang. He opened it and saw that it was a call to the office, so he held up a finger to Hannibal and answered.

“Doctor Lecter’s office, how can I help you?”

Will saw the slight tilt of Hannibal’s head when he heard the greeting, and he smiled.

“Hi. This is Franklyn Froideveux. I was wondering if Doctor Lecter could get me in early today. I’m feeling a lot of anxiety.”

Will hummed in thought, pulling Hannibal’s schedule up to the front of his mind and checking the open hours.

“I’m sorry, Mister Froideveux,” Will said, “It looks like Doctor Lecter’s day is full. I can call you back if something opens up, but please just plan to come in at the usual time. Is this the

number I can most easily reach you at?"

"Yes," Franklyn said, clearly disappointed, "I guess I'll talk to you later."

"Thank you for calling, sir," Will said, "have a good day."

Will looked up at Hannibal, his tail swishing happily.

"Do you have my schedule memorized?" Hannibal asked, looking entirely amused by the idea.

Will shrugged.

"I have a photographic memory, so that bit wasn't hard. The real trick was to have the calls rerouted to my cell so I can answer calls outside of office hours and have them identified as office calls," he said with a grin, "I hope you don't mind it."

Hannibal smiled widely and shook his head.

"I don't mind at all. You are truly going above and beyond your duties as my assistant," Hannibal said, "I rather think I don't pay you nearly enough."

Will laughed.

"Honestly," he said, "it's no trouble. I didn't just want to work with you for the money. Remember, I did my research. I know who I work for, and I picked you on purpose."

Hannibal felt a pang of endearment at Will's words.

Will, this amazing creature that could have easily been hired to nearly any job he applied for, had specifically chosen *Hannibal* as his employer. There was something about Hannibal that Will had found *better* than others. While Hannibal didn't typically have any problems with his confidence, he did like the thought that Will saw him as superior to others in some way.

Hannibal hoped Will would agree to come with him on an investigation. Hannibal wanted to see how his mind would work around such a puzzle. There was something peculiar and unique in Will's head, and Hannibal wanted to bring it out. Hannibal was sure Will's mind contained something valuable, and he would be the one to discover it.

Hannibal would just have to find opportunities to entice Will to show his true nature.

—-

"Shouldn't you be muzzled or something?"

Will felt himself bristle at the suggestion, but he fixed a smile to his face and tried not to snap at the man.

“No, sir,” he said pleasantly, “what can I help you with today?”

The man frowned skeptically. He eyed Will’s ears and tail suspiciously, as if at any moment they would cause him harm in some way.

“I just thought that manifest wolves are *dangerous*,” he continued, “and they usually don’t work with people because they’re *violent*.”

Will steeled himself for the rest of this conversation, reminding himself he couldn’t do anything that would reflect poorly on doctor Lecter.

“I don’t have the same violent tendencies as some others,” he explained carefully, “and there is actually evidence that manifest wolves are no more inherently violent than regular wolves or humans who are not wolf at all. Now, is there something I can help you with?”

The man seemed unconvinced, but he eventually got past it and asked Will to set him an appointment to see Hannibal. Will did, forcing himself not to do anything rude or unkind to the man. He wouldn’t let this get in the way of doing his job.

He understood that the discrimination against Manifest wolves was deeply ingrained into society, but that didn’t stop him from feeling the sting of judgment from strangers. Manifest wolves had often been denied opportunities because they were seen as violent or volatile. Will had been required to go through many tests over the course of his education and applying for jobs to show that he was not inclined to be aggressive.

The rest of the day, Will had a bit of a harder time acting happy for the patients, but they didn’t seem to notice. No one noticed until he was getting packed up to head home.

“Will,” Hannibal called from the door leading to his office, “is something on your mind? You have been somewhat distracted today.”

Will sighed and shook his head.

“Yeah. Something’s on my mind, but I shouldn’t bother you with it. I really shouldn’t let it bother *me* ,” he said.

Hannibal frowned and walked over to Will.

“I’ll not pester you about it. I just hope to let you know I would not see it as a bother if it would help you to talk to someone about it.”

Will smiled wryly. Hannibal actually hadn’t required Will to provide proof of his mild temper when he had applied, which had been something Will appreciated more than he would ever admit. That didn’t mean he was going to lay this kind of problem at the man’s feet and ask him to fix it. Will wasn’t weak, even if he wasn’t aggressive, and the full moon was coming up. A chance to relieve some stress.

“That’s part of your job description,” he pointed out, “but *I’m* not paying you to care about my problems.”

Hannibal sighed softly.

“I am not offering out of obligation based upon my job description,” he said, “But perhaps my occupation provides me with the understanding that simply sharing a burden can lighten the load. Please, if you wish to talk, I am always happy to help.”

Will didn’t reply, but Hannibal didn’t wait for him to. Hannibal left, leaving Will standing at the desk in silence.

5

Hannibal knew something was bothering Will, and he wanted to know what. It was clear that Will had been distracted that day, as his tail and ears had been less reactive than usual, remaining still even when Hannibal walked by or talked to him.

What might be bothering Will was a mystery to Hannibal, which was interesting in its own right. So often, others would open up to him about the shadows of their past or the demons in their head, without much prompting. But Will carried all his darkness in silence, not wanting to inconvenience Hannibal with his problems.

It was as refreshing to Hannibal as it was momentarily frustrating.

During the next few days, Will continued to appear bothered by something. He was overly conscious of his own movements, especially when either his tail or his ears would become expressive. Will would flinch or grimace whenever his tail would wag or his ears would perk up, as if their movements were some betrayal to him or they embarrassed him more than before.

Hannibal wondered why this would have happened. Will had become more comfortable with himself in the time he had been working with Hannibal, and it had made Hannibal pleased to see him embracing his nature. Something had gotten in the way of that progress.

When the answer finally showed itself, Hannibal was not pleased.

“Aren’t you nervous?”

Hannibal tipped his head to show interest and curiosity to his new patient. He wasn’t sure what the man was referring to.

“Pardon?” Hannibal replied politely.

“Your secretary being a Manifest,” Warren explained, as if it should be obvious, “aren’t you worried he’s going to attack someone one of these days?”

Hannibal smiled politely, though he felt anger burn in his veins at this man’s impudence.

This must be what had bothered Will. This man must have said something to him when setting up his first appointment.

“Will is my assistant, as it so happens,” Hannibal answered calmly, “not simply a secretary. That being said, I think he is more than qualified to do the job that I ask of him. He is not aggressive in the slightest.”

Warren nodded, as if he knew all of that.

“Sure, but wouldn’t you feel safer if he wore a muzzle or something? Maybe help your patients to feel safer as well?” he continued.

Hannibal had to take a breath to stop himself from showing his anger outwardly.

“I most certainly would not ever even so much as suggest he do such a thing,” Hannibal said coolly, “Will is likely much more human than even you or I, and he deserves to be treated with respect. He is no more an animal than you are. To imply he is more likely to harm someone than any other person is to show that you are prejudiced against someone you know little or nothing about.”

Warren seemed shocked that Hannibal had said that to him. He blinked in surprise and floundered like a dying fish for a moment.

“Well, I just, don’t you think your patients would feel safer?” he asked.

Hannibal smiled coldly.

“If you feel unsafe because of how I choose to treat my assistant, you are welcome to look elsewhere for therapy,” Hannibal said, keeping his composure as well as he could.

Hannibal did not often find it hard to be polite, especially with his patients, but he felt intuitively that Will would not defend himself against prejudice of this sort. There was some part of Will that felt he deserved this treatment, and he would allow it to continue. Hannibal refused to do so.

“As a matter of fact,” Hannibal continued, “if you are unable to treat Will with the respect he deserves, it would be better for all of us if you did.”

Warren was completely speechless, staring at Hannibal as if he had suddenly sprouted his own pair of dog ears through his hair. After a long moment of tense silence, Warren stood and gathered his things. Hannibal stood as well and walked him to the door.

“I am very sorry I do not seem to be able to help you,” Hannibal said honestly, “I will have you fully refunded for the session. Thank you for your time.”

Warren seemed completely incapable of speech as he all but fled from the building. Hannibal had been sure to have him leave through the front, so that Will could see, and he watched as Will saw Warren leave in such a hurry.

Will’s ears perked up, but his head tipped curiously. His hands stilled on the desk, and he furrowed his brow. Once the door shut behind Warren, Will turned to Hannibal expectantly.

Hannibal walked over to the desk, smiling politely.

“Mister Harris is no longer in need of my service,” he said, “and I would like to refund him for this session, as I was unable to offer any help to him, and it was cut short.”

Will nodded, though it was clear he was still curious. He tapped away on the computer for a moment and filled out the required paperwork as well. He was very organized and efficient,

and Hannibal enjoyed watching him work.

Once Will finished, he folded his hands together and looked back up at Hannibal. His expression left no room for argument. Hannibal *must* explain.

“I apologize for his behavior,” Hannibal offered, “I was not aware he had caused your discomfort, but I have dealt with the problem now. Neither of us will have to deal with him again.”

Will frowned, looking down at his hands.

“You shouldn’t do that,” he said carefully, his ears flat against his head and his tail wrapping around a leg of the chair.

“Do what?” Hannibal asked innocently.

Will fidgeted a bit, seeming nervous.

“You shouldn’t refuse a patient because of me,” he said, “now he might talk about you, and it could hurt your reputation. I can handle myself. I’ve had to deal with that kind of thing all my life.”

Hannibal frowned.

“I do apologize that this is something you must concern yourself with,” he said, “but while you are working in this office, I refuse to knowingly allow you to be put through it.”

A slight tint of pink rose in Will’s cheeks, and his tail swished once. Hannibal smiled, reassured that Will was not upset with him.

“Thank you,” Will said softly, his ears beginning to stand up as well, “I appreciate it.”

Hannibal nodded.

“Just be sure to let me know if anything of the sort happens again, so that it may be dealt with,” he said.

Will nodded, smiling a bit as his tail began to wag in earnest now. It pleased Hannibal to see Will happy, and he was glad he had been able to fix what had been bothering him.

“And you needn’t worry about my reputation,” Hannibal assured Will, “I would much rather be known as a man who stands up for his friends than one who tolerates rudeness.”

Will’s blush darkened, and his ears twitched excitedly.

“Even if it hurts your business?” he asked, still concerned.

Hannibal smiled.

“It’s of no real concern to me,” he said, “and I would rather have no patients at all than humor men who speak that way about you.”

Will took a long sip of his coffee, probably trying to hide the blush that had now spread to his neck. Hannibal wondered if it extended down under his shirt to his shoulders and chest.

“I really can’t thank you enough,” Will said, “I don’t think you’ll ever really know how much that means to me.”

Hannibal believed him. There were some things that were nearly impossible to understand from the outside. He knew Will saw it differently than he did, even if they had the same opinion about it. Will was living it, and Hannibal was only observing.

6

Will drove out to a large open field after work. The sun was starting to go down, and the moon was already up. It was a full moon, looking like someone had tossed a coin into the sky and the whole world was waiting for it to drop.

Will smiled to himself, feeling that familiar itch just under his skin. He had always enjoyed full moon nights, ever since he was a kid. There was a freedom in following his nature in this way. He fought his nature so often, or he used it, but on nights like this he and his nature could be one in purpose and intent.

Will parked his car and got out, shrugging out of his clothes as he did so. No reason to ruin them. He was all alone out here. He couldn't hear or smell anyone.

What Will could hear and smell were the signs of wild nature at its best. He smelled trees and grass, and he could hear small animals scurrying around on the soft dirt. He felt the cool night air on his face, and he took in a deep breath before he changed.

The change was never painful. Not since the first time. Instead, it was like he had been curled up for hours upon hours, and he was finally able to stretch his limbs again. It relieved an ache in him, and he loved it.

Will shook, his shaggy fur rolling in waves over his body and his ears flopping almost comically. He grinned up at the sky and let out a low woof. He wanted to howl, but that always attracted others, and he preferred being alone.

Then, Will set off. He ran at full speed across the field, the ground seeming to fly under his paws as he did. He could smell all the little creatures that fled before him, and he smiled. He had no intention of harming any of them. He wasn't here to hunt. He was just here to run.

The world was so different at night, and more so when one was a wolf. Will could hear the night insects, and the nocturnal critters waking up, and he could taste the coolness of the air as the sun sank lower beneath the horizon. The moon shone down with its cold light, unlike anything else. Will had never been able to equivocate anything to the moon. Other things could be compared to the moon, but the moon could never be compared to anything else. The moon was a constant, a reference point, the center of it all.

Of course, Will knew logically that this thinking wasn't necessarily correct, but that didn't matter. It never really mattered, but it mattered even less when he was running in the moonlight, his large paws falling softly on the earth below, hardly making any sound.

No, nothing really mattered during this time. Just the moment, and the moon, and Will running to the tree line.

Will spent almost the entire night running through the woods, cutting his claws on trees, and generally messing around. He chased fireflies until they all went back under their leaves for the night, then tracked chirping frogs for a while just to keep himself amused. He would

usually feel like he was wasting time doing this, but he had decided he was allowed this. He didn't allow himself to taint this time with guilt. He worked all the time, but not now.

When the moon had sunk beneath the horizon, following the path of the sun, Will made his way back to his car. He trotted back to it, his tongue lolling happily in a way he would never do if someone else were present, and changed back. He pulled his clothes back on and drove home.

Will felt great after that. He grinned the whole way home, and he honestly felt amazing. His tail was thumping against the door next to him the entire drive, and he even burst into fits of laughter every now and then, not because anything was funny, but his chest just felt full and he needed to let it out.

This was something Will needed. He had tried to refrain from changing at all for a while once, but he had nearly made himself sick with anxiety during that time. Once he had gotten back to changing regularly, he had felt better. He didn't know exactly why that was, but he had thought it must be something about rejecting his nature. He needed to come to terms with his nature, not try to fight against it.

When Will got back to his apartment, he was still feeling great. He made himself a steak, because he always craved meat after changing, and had a glass of whiskey. He used to make burgers or something, but his new job with Hannibal paid well enough he could afford a treat like this for special occasions.

And Hannibal was being so great as a boss. Will hadn't hoped for it. Hadn't allowed himself to hope for it. But Hannibal actually did respect him as a person. He didn't just see Will as a specimen, though he had some professional curiosity of course, and he had defended Will when someone had insulted him. Hannibal was actually kind, and not out of pity. Will had never met someone like Hannibal.

Will's phone pinged, and he saw that he had a text from Hannibal. The man probably would have called if it wasn't only three in the morning. Will smiled, remembering how Hannibal had defended him against Warren, without Will asking him to or telling him what the man had said.

- *I am being asked to attend a crime scene today. I would like you to reschedule my first two appointments, just to be safe.*

-*I would also like you to accompany me to the scene.*

Will frowned.

They hadn't talked about the crime scene situation again since the first time, and Will really did want to help if he could, but he didn't want Hannibal to think he was too eager to please. And there was the fact that he still had yet to sleep since going to work the morning before. He really should get some sleep.

Will quickly sent emails and text messages to the patients who would need rescheduling before he replied to Hannibal.

- *I've initiated the rescheduling process. I'll have to finish it when the patients are awake. I don't want to be a burden, and the office should really have someone there while you are away. I think I should stay behind on this one.*

There was a long break before Will got an answer to that. He wondered if Hannibal was actually awake, or if he had gone back to sleep immediately after sending his first text. Will was about to give up and head to bed himself, for a few hours of precious sleep, when he got the reply.

- *Please*

Will sighed. Defeated.

That one word, from someone like Hannibal Lecter, meant more than Will would ever admit. He knew Hannibal really did want him to come, for his own reasons. He was not asking on the FBI's behalf, or on behalf of the investigation. He was asking for himself. And that was why Will knew he wouldn't be able to say no. Not to mention, after what Hannibal had done for him, unprompted, Will didn't want to deny the man anything.

- *Alright. I'll come.*

Will sent the text and tossed his phone onto his bed as he changed into something he could sleep in. He really did intend to get at least one hour of sleep tonight. He needed to be doing something other than waiting for Hannibal's response, too, and he tried to take his mind to other things as he changed.

His phone pinged again, and he tossed his clothes into the hamper as he rolled into bed.

- *Thank you. I will be there to pick you up at six.*

Will sighed, counting the hours he had between now and then for sleep. He would have to go to bed early tomorrow, to make up for this.

Oh, but running through that field had been worth it.

7

Will managed to sleep right up to his alarm, which was rare for him. He dressed and made sure to comb his hair and look as presentable as possible. He felt some trepidation, knowing he would be meeting agents from the FBI that day, and he was known to them as Hannibal's assistant. He represented Hannibal, now, so he had to make a good impression.

Hannibal parked outside the apartment at exactly six, and Will was out to the car before the man had a chance to come and knock. Hannibal smiled and opened the door for Will, always the gentleman.

"Good morning," Hannibal said pleasantly, not showing any sign of fatigue, "was it a very late night?"

Will huffed a laugh as Hannibal slid into the driver's seat and they started on their way.

"Later than usual," he agreed, "but I'm in for a busy morning."

As if on cue, Will's phone rang with the first of the patients needing to reschedule. He was on the phone for the entire drive, reorganizing Hannibal's schedule and keeping up with the other calls that he usually got in the mornings. Hannibal Lecter was very popular in the academic field, as well as just in general.

Will finally put his phone away, and it was just in time for Hannibal to stop the car at wherever they had been called to. Will stopped Hannibal before he could get out of the car, a plan already formulating in his head.

"Let me open the door for you this time," he said, then explained, because Hannibal looked like he was going to object, "I want to make an impression, and just see if I don't"

At that, Hannibal's expression turned from stern confusion to impressed anticipation, and he nodded as he switched the engine off. Will hopped out and ran to the other side of the car. Hannibal nodded to him as he stepped out, and Will nodded back in a professional way, as if they had done it a hundred times.

Jack Crawford was shorter than Will, just a bit, but he had a large stature and a commanding presence. Will knew he was the man before the introductions were made.

"Agent Crawford," Hannibal said pleasantly, "this is my assistant, Will Graham. I have asked him to come with me today, so you may consult him on my schedule."

Jack smiled, though he clearly felt annoyed that Will was there. He didn't want to "consult" on Hannibal's schedule. He just wanted Hannibal to be available to him when he needed.

Will also smiled, but it was one that clearly showed he only did so out of professional politeness. They shook hands, and Will made a bit of a show of examining Agent Crawford.

“I hope I’m not too much of an inconvenience, and that we can come to a nice compromise,” he said, despite taking a small amount of pleasure in being an inconvenience.

Crawford nodded.

“We can talk later, but for now, I have a crime scene, and I need an expert profiler,” he said, looking pointedly at Hannibal.

Hannibal nodded genially and allowed himself to be led into the house. Will followed, having not yet been told he was not allowed, and determined to make the impression he had set out to. Once inside, Will garnered a few odd glances from the agents that were working there, but he just acted as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

“Sorry, but you need to stay out here,” Jack said when they reached a doorway that led to a bedroom and had been sectioned off.

Will would have gladly accepted that, not having set out to see a dead body that morning, but Hannibal spoke up first.

“I would like him to join me, actually,” he said, surprising both Jack and Will, “I value Will’s advice greatly, and I believe his skill set will complement my own. A profile will be more forthcoming with us both.”

Will, still working on the image he meant to show Jack, simply turned to the agent with an expression of calm expectance.

Jack didn’t look too happy about it, but he sighed and waved Will forward as well. That gave Will the impression that Hannibal’s consultation was not exactly by the books to begin with. Something he had already suspected due to the lack of paperwork he had seen concerning it in the files at the office.

Will nodded respectfully and followed Hannibal into the bedroom. He steeled himself for whatever he was about to see.

The woman had been strangled, so there wasn’t a lot of blood. Will recognized that he should be thankful for that, but a separate part of him felt a bit disappointed. She lay on her bed, staring at the ceiling with an expression of awed horror. Her arms were outstretched to either side, and her legs were together, as if she had been nailed to a cross. She was still clothed in a white nightgown, and she looked almost like a ghost.

That’s what she is, now, Will thought humorlessly.

Will looked up, and saw what her eyes were fixed on above her.

There was a message written on the ceiling above the bed where she lay. It looked like it had been made with lipstick. A vibrant red shade.

A thousand words

Will knew immediately that the lipstick hadn't belonged to the dead woman. The shade was too bright and flashy. The woman had cream sheets and blue pillowcases. The couches were brown and the throw pillows were white. The walls were tan, and so was the carpet. She just wasn't the kind of person to wear lipstick that flashy. He doubted she would even dress up for Halloween. She didn't like that kind of attention.

"Strangulation is a personal way to kill," Hannibal said, walking around and studying the body, "Intimate. The killer probably knew the victim. Even so, they had set it up carefully, and with meaning, so there are likely to be others. They will probably have the same victim profile."

"The killer definitely knew the victim, but I can't be sure the victim would have recognized the killer," Will said absently, "the message. It's only half of it. *A picture's worth a thousand words*. That's what the whole thing would say. They are saying this is a creation, and a message. They are saying something through killing her. I think they are envious of her. They want to be like her, in some way. It's possible the killer had been watching her for some time before they killed her, so the woman may not have known anything about them. If the next, or previous if I happen to be behind on this, victim has the same victim profile as this one, then we can start to narrow down what about them the killer envies."

"Am I looking for a man or a woman?" Jack asked grumpily, apparently not pleased with the way Hannibal and Will were going about this.

Will looked up at Hannibal, who inclined his head in a bid for Will to answer the question.

"Maybe neither, maybe both," Will told the agent with a shrug, "that's why we need to find out what the killer envies. Do they envy the fact that no one questions the victim is a woman, or do they envy the fact that she is not confused? Do they envy the way she looks, or the way she could if she tried?"

Hannibal was smiling, almost smugly. If Will allowed himself to dwell on it, it was like Hannibal was showing him off.

"By delving into the motivations of the killer, we should be able to give you a better picture of who to look for, Jack," Hannibal said, "I would suggest making Will an official part of the investigation. In conjunction with me, of course. He is my assistant."

Jack was looking at Will as if he hadn't actually noticed him before. Will would have been nervous about the expression on his face if Hannibal had not already placed himself between them by adding the condition of their partnership. The look told Will Jack was starting to see him as someone who could be useful, and hopefully easy to wheedle into helping even when he didn't want to. Will was glad he had decided on the impression he had workshopped for today, because he knew Jack was a difficult man to reject.

"What do you want me to do to help us get there faster?" Jack asked, folding his arms and looking back at the body on the bed. His expression changed, now more determined to catch a killer than to lure an unsuspecting consultant.

Hannibal stepped back around the bed so he was standing next to Will. He seemed pleased with how the entire situation had gone, oddly unbothered by the fact they were standing near a dead body.

“If we can have the file, Will and I will be able to work on the profile when I do not have clients, as long as Will agrees with that. I’m sure he would like to discuss my work schedule with you. I have a call to make, if you will both excuse me for a moment,” Hannibal said, smiling to Will as he walked away.

Will turned back to Jack with a brilliant smile, as overly professionally charming as he could manage. Jack did not return the smile, but Will hadn’t expected him to.

Jack sighed in frustration and nodded, seeming to realize he wasn’t getting out of this.

8

“Five on Thursday?”

“Nope. Doctor Lecter has a patient at that time.”

“Damnit, Graham. He seems to have a patient for every hour of the day!”

“Doctor Lecter is a very good psychiatrist, and he is well valued,” Will said calmly in reply, “Maybe now you’ll realize what you should have been asking me all along.”

There was a brief silence, and Hannibal almost wondered if Jack might not know what Will was implying.

“What times during the week is he available to help?” Jack sighed, clearly worn out by dealing with Will.

Hannibal could envision the bright, cheeky smile Will would put on, as if dealing with someone who was particularly dense. It was clear the impression he intended to make was that Hannibal was in control, but Will was a fierce foot soldier under his command. Hannibal was intrigued, as he hadn’t seen this side of Will before today.

“Exactly,” Will said pleasantly, “Doctor Lecter has an open hour at seven on Tuesdays, and three whole open consecutive hours on Wednesday mornings, from nine to twelve, at which point he goes to lunch. If you need him, that’s your best bet, though he also has an opening in the evenings on Fridays. If you would like to encroach on the time he likely uses for relaxation and pleasure, I suppose that is also open to you.”

Hannibal had to actually suppress laughter when he heard that. Will was taking the task of getting Jack off Hannibal’s back very seriously. And despite that, he in no way sounded desperate to get rid of him.

“You have his entire schedule memorized, don’t you?” Jack asked, “everything available to you is knocking around in your head now. Why do you care so much?”

Hannibal prepared to make his presence known, to save Will from the more awkward line of questions.

“Doctor Lecter is a very good psychiatrist,” Will reiterated, his tone misleadingly calm, making Hannibal wait a moment longer, “He wouldn’t settle for an assistant who can’t remember important things, and I don’t intend to be replaced anytime soon. Now, if you don’t lay claim to one of the openings we’ve discussed, I will consider them open for patient sessions.”

Then, Hannibal really did reveal himself. He walked up to Will with a warm smile.

“Now, Will,” Hannibal chided gently, “don’t give Agent Crawford too hard of a time. I’m sure he is just anxious to see this case closed.”

Will turned and looked at Hannibal, his ears perking up and his tail giving a single swish.

“That is understandable,” Will deferred, “but it is *his* job to find the killer and not yours. He can’t just upturn your profession because he can’t do his job without you.”

Jack looked about ready to explode with irritation, dangerously close to anger. Hannibal admired the job Will had done, getting what he wanted and keeping Jack on the knife edge the entire time. Hannibal almost had to suppress another laugh, but managed to restrain himself.

“I am happy to help him where I can,” Hannibal said, more to assure Jack than to argue with Will, “And I think Will has made it clear where my availability lies.”

Triumph shone on Will’s face, and he turned back to Jack. Jack’s anger had faded, so now he appeared defeated. Resigned to the fate Will had granted him.

“Alright, fine,” he said gruffly, “Wednesdays, then. For as much time as I can get him.”

Will smiled brightly, the picture of perfect customer service, and nodded.

“Perfect. I’ll put you in, and I’ll be sure to let you know if and when conflicts arise. Thank you for being so agreeable.”

Hannibal smiled, though he turned away to hide it from Jack. He hadn’t witnessed Will put on this particular act before, though he wondered if Warren had been on the receiving end of it, and he thought it showed just how brilliant Will was, that he not only knew it would help in this situation, but also that he had the ability to pull it off.

And Jack would be none the wiser.

“Sure. Fine,” Jack said, waving him off, “just be sure to get me that profile the soonest you can.”

Will and Hannibal both agreed as they made their way back to the car. Will opened Hannibal’s door again, and then they were off, in the direction of the office once more.

After a few minutes of driving in comfortable silence, Will let out a long sigh and Hannibal thought he sounded exhausted. When he glanced over, he saw that Will was sitting a bit low in his seat and his ears were hanging low. He *looked* exhausted as well.

“How many hours of sleep did you get last night, Will?” Hannibal asked gently, and Will started a bit at his voice.

“Oh, uh, probably about two,” Will answered, looking down at his hands as if ashamed to admit it, “three if I was lucky, but I wouldn’t count on it.”

Hannibal nodded, but he frowned.

Why would Will have stayed up that long? From what Hannibal had learned of him so far, Will had a strict schedule he held himself to in order to keep himself healthy and functional.

Except for nights of the full moon.

Will had only mentioned it once, in passing, but Hannibal realized the moon had been full just that past night. Will had been up late because of the transformation, likely something tiring in and of itself, and Hannibal had asked him to come out to a crime scene early in the morning simply to satisfy his own curiosity.

Reactions to that realization warred within Hannibal. He felt a great deal of regret for having asked this of Will and contributed to his exhaustion. But he also felt a great swell of admiration, because Will had managed to function well, amazingly even, while under those conditions. Will had managed so well that Hannibal hadn't noticed his state until now. However impressed Hannibal had been with Will's dealing with Jack before, it increased exponentially now.

"You will take the day off," Hannibal decided, leaving no room for argument, "I should have told you to take this day off regardless, but instead I dragged you from your bed to look at a dead body."

Will laughed and shook his head.

"Not gonna happen," he said, "I've already planned out how to make up for the lost sleep, and I won't be missing any work unless I'm dying. Even then, you might have a fight on your hands."

"Will," Hannibal said, unsure why Will would argue with him about this, "you clearly need rest. For what reason are you unwilling to take today off to do so?"

There was a brief pause, and Hannibal wondered if Will would decide not to answer. Then, Will bodily turned in his seat to face Hannibal, and spoke.

"What would your patients think if I wasn't at the desk, and it just so happens to be the day after the full moon?" he asked, his tone low and dangerous.

Hannibal had never heard him sound that way, and he had to suppress the sudden thrill it sent up his spine.

"That being a werewolf has tired you out," he said, knowing that was the most watered down and sugar coated version of the truth available.

Will huffed a laugh, knowing that too.

"They would probably think I'm taking advantage of your kindness, at the *very* least," Will corrected him, "If they know I don't actually *have* to transform for a full moon. But most of them probably wouldn't be so nice. They would think that I'm using the excuse of the full moon to be violent, just like the monster everyone tells them I am. They might think I've been injured, and they would attribute it to a prey item fighting back. Of course, in their

minds, my prey is always human. If I do not go into work *and* act as if everything is as normal, they will all think I'm a monster. So don't try it."

And Hannibal didn't. He didn't say another word about Will needing rest or taking a day off. For a long portion of the drive neither of them said anything.

"May I invite you to lunch again?" Hannibal finally managed to ask, wanting both to do something as penance for causing Will to be more tired, and to offer something to help. Will always looked as if he could use a good meal, and Hannibal wanted to provide it this time.

Will looked at him for a long moment.

"You feel sorry you forgot," he said hesitantly, almost in awe, "you're sorry you asked me to come to the scene this morning, because last night was the full moon."

Hannibal nodded. He didn't trust himself to say anything in response that he would not instantly regret.

"Sure," Will said with a shrug, "I haven't made myself a lunch yet, 'cause of the early morning field trip, so I guess I just won't bother. If your cooking wasn't as good as it is, I might not have agreed, but you've offered me something I know I'll like."

Hannibal smiled, feeling relief wash over him. Will had agreed to it.

"I'm pleased to hear it," he said honestly, "I have been looking for another chance to invite you to dine with me. I rather think I should have offered to bring you breakfast this morning. At the very least to repay you for being so accommodating."

Will huffed a laugh. His tail, which had been still for the entire conversation until now, began to wag, thumping against the car door softly.

"Don't worry about that. I had a very late dinner last night, and I won't be hungry again until lunch anyway. Even if seeing a dead body hadn't changed my appetite."

Hannibal nodded, still smiling.

He had actually been impressed by the lack of reaction Will had shown when they saw the crime scene. It had not been bloody, but it would have turned the stomach of most new agents regardless. Will had only looked at it with a clinical sort of interest, then growing fascination as they had discussed the killer profile. Hannibal wanted to know what about the scene had fascinated Will so much, and he hoped the homework Jack had given them would provide an opportunity to discuss it.

9

Will had been wrong.

He was hungry again only a few hours after getting to the office.

He had known the full moon business always made his metabolism a bit quicker, but he thought he had taken that into account.

Regardless of what the mistake was he had made, Will was just glad his stomach had never been loud about being empty. While he felt the hunger, and it was sometimes even painful, no one would have to know.

So, Will was hungry and tired by the time Hannibal emerged from his office, smiling and asking if he was ready to go. Will nodded, returning the smile gratefully as he put some papers back into the drawers and made sure everything was locked up. He helped Hannibal into his coat, who then did the same for him. It was a bit weird, still, to have Hannibal return the courtesy, just because he was in charge. It felt like, out of the two of them, Hannibal should be the one waited on, be it by Will or anyone else he happened to meet. The man had some sort of innate regality about him, making his service to anyone else feel slightly wrong.

Except, Will realized as they made their way out, when he was in his own house.

In Hannibal's home, it did not feel odd or wrong for him to help you with your coat, or serve you at the table. It almost felt like it was all a performance, and his house was the stage that had been properly set.

That thought amused Will as they drove, and Hannibal seemed to notice.

"What might you be thinking about just now, to make you smile?" he asked, smiling himself as if unable to keep from mirroring Will's expression.

Will jumped slightly as he was startled from his musings, and he ducked his head bashfully.

"I'm afraid it would be either rude or childish of me to tell you," he confessed, feeling a heat rise to his cheeks.

Hannibal's expression of interest never wavered, but only intensified at Will's words.

"Oh? I find those are some of the most amusing thoughts to put voice to," Hannibal said, and Will got the feeling he wanted to know very much, for whatever reason.

"Well," Will began hesitantly, not wanting to offend Hannibal with what he said, "I was just thinking that it sometimes seems like you're putting on a performance, and while it's always interesting and impressive, your house is possibly the only place it really belongs. Like seeing someone perform ballet in a school gym in comparison to a stage."

Will shut his mouth, knowing he could keep talking, but deciding to stop there and see what Hannibal would do in response. If he kept talking, Will was sure he would offend his employer.

Hannibal mulled it over for a moment, making Will more nervous. At long last, Hannibal spoke one word in response.

“Remarkable.”

Will flushed again, his cheeks burning, and wrung his hands together in his lap.

“I know it probably sounds rude, like I’m saying you’re only acting all the time, or that you’re fake, but I swear I didn’t mean it that way. I’m really sorry. I shouldn’t have-”

“No, Will,” Hannibal cut him off, calmly but firm, “No need to apologize. I am incredibly impressed by you, for this among other things. You are not in the best condition for mental exercise today, due to your sleep loss, but you have impressed me with your observations this morning. It appears that, even when you are not actively doing so, your incredible insight and observational skills would outshine almost anyone. It may have been taken as rude if any part of it was not true, but I assure you I am not offended in the least.”

Will gawked for a moment.

He didn’t understand how Hannibal could possibly not be offended by what he had said. Not only that, but he claimed to be impressed, and he said Will had been correct in his observations. Almost anyone else would have decided he had been intentionally insulting them, but Hannibal was claiming to be impressed, and Will was inclined to believe him.

Will had never seen or felt anything that would make him question Hannibal’s honesty. Hannibal was quite possibly the only person Will had ever met whom he thought was almost entirely honest. At most, Hannibal had stretched the truth or left out details if he hadn’t wanted to be perfectly frank.

Hannibal glanced over at Will, meeting his eyes, and smiled.

“Is it so fantastic to think I am not upset with you?” he asked, “have you never met someone who was impressed by your insight?”

Will shook himself back to the present and cleared his throat.

“No. I mean, I have,” he stuttered, “a few of my college professors were impressed with me, but I try not to tell people about the observations I make about them. Anyone who hears what I think about them are usually freaked out. It’s not a great way to make friends.”

Hannibal hummed in consideration, the smile falling from his face.

“I’m sorry the world has not treated you well, Will,” Hannibal said seriously, “I would make up for all of it if I could.”

Will stared again, sure there was no way he had heard that correctly. Just like how Hannibal naturally treated Will with respect, all other people he had met had naturally treated him with distance. Respect was something most people had to learn to give Will, which led him to fear Hannibal would learn to treat him with fear.

And maybe that was the whole reason he had reacted to Hannibal's response that way. The world had taught him that people changed their behavior once they got to know him, and he didn't want Hannibal to change. He liked the relationship they had, and couldn't bear the thought of Hannibal ever starting to fear him.

"Sorry," Will said, ducking his head when he managed to tear his eyes away from Hannibal, "You don't have to make up for anything. You've always been nice to me. I can handle everyone else just fine on my own."

Hannibal nodded, and a small smile touched the edges of his lips.

"I'm sure you can," he said warmly, "I'm incredibly impressed with your dealing with Jack this morning."

Will grinned, knowing deep down that a lot of his act that morning had been for the purpose of impressing Hannibal, though he'd not be quick to admit it.

"You liked that? I told you I'd make an impression, didn't I? I don't think Agent Crawford will be quick to bother you without good reason, now. I don't think he liked me much," Will said, and heard his tail thump against the car door.

Hannibal laughed and shook his head.

"He is most certainly more than a bit angry with you," he agreed, "but I am sure he was likewise impressed by your observations. If you had not been quite so stern with him, I rather think he would have tried to steal you from me with an offer to work for the bureau."

Will huffed a laugh and nodded.

"Yeah, probably," he said, "which made me all the more glad I'd set out to make an impression. He wanted to avoid getting told off again, so he didn't make an offer. He probably thinks he might find a better time to try his luck, though."

Hannibal's returning silence made Will's anxiety spike, and he looked at his companion curiously. Hannibal's mouth had turned down into a frown, and the rest of his features looked as if they had been set in marble.

"Hannibal? Did I upset you? I'm sorry if I did. I really didn't mean to," Will started rambling, trying to make up for whatever his mistake had been.

"No, Will," Hannibal said kindly, "it's not you I'm upset with. Jack is a rather hard man to say no to, I'm sure you realize. I'm concerned for you if Jack decides he must get his claws into you."

Will couldn't help but laugh then.

“If one of us has claws, I’m pretty sure it’s not Jack,” he said with a grin, “but I understand the concern. I’ll make sure to keep my defenses up with him. If he’s got claws, I’ll make sure I have mine out from now on, alright?”

Hannibal’s smile returned and he nodded.

“As long as you are vigilant. I wouldn’t want you to be roped into something that would be harmful to you, and I cannot be sure how your mind might react to being bombarded with horrors as those Jack works with. I trust your judgement. Just be aware.”

Will hummed in agreement as they pulled up in front of Hannibal’s house. It felt like the drive had taken forever, but that was probably just because he was starving. Will tried not to show his impatience, but he knew the steady beat of his tail as they walked in was likely betraying his anticipation.

If Hannibal noticed, he was nothing but pleased by it, as he was still smiling genially as they entered the kitchen.

Hannibal set out immediately preparing their food. He moved with a natural grace Will usually contributed to animals he had seen in the forest. Predators, usually. Prey animals moved with more hesitance, which Will saw none of in Hannibal’s actions.

And there was a predatory way in the roll of Hannibal’s muscles. The line of his back as he lifted pans and ingredients, and the measured confidence as he cut them.

Will wondered why he would decide Hannibal’s movements were predatory, but he supposed it was for the same reason he had decided Hannibal seemed to always be performing.

Nowhere was the performance more total or more impressive than when Hannibal was cooking. It was clear he took real joy in the task, and pride in the results. Will admired that about him. Hannibal was a master of his craft, and he knew it.

When the smell of cooking meat filled the air, Will had to swallow a sudden rush of saliva that would have left him drooling otherwise. One aspect of his nature he wasn’t thrilled about.

Hannibal looked up at Will with a knowing smile, and Will blushed, but he knew his tail was betraying his excitement. He was just glad Hannibal didn’t seem to mind. If anything, Will thought Hannibal enjoyed the insight into Will’s feelings.

“Shall we?” Hannibal asked, having added the final touches to their plates, gesturing to the dining room.

Will nodded and they sat for their meal.

10

Hannibal would have bet on the fact that Will was actually far more hungry than he was letting on.

Will's tail was wagging excitedly as he ate, and Hannibal thought it looked as if he was having to restrain himself from eating far more quickly than would be socially acceptable. Hannibal found every one of Will's mannerisms increasingly endearing. It could potentially be inconvenient for Hannibal to be so fond of him, but he couldn't find it in himself to care just yet. He would deal with it if it ever became necessary, but for now he would allow himself to enjoy every aspect of Will's personality.

It had been a long time since Hannibal had worked with an assistant. In general, he didn't consider hardly anyone to be qualified, much less interesting enough that he would want to spend extended amounts of time with them.

When he had seen Will's application, he had been impressed, and curious. Not only by the fact that Will seemed over qualified for the position he was applying for, but because Hannibal had met quite a few Manifest Wolves in his time, and all had been more interested in their athletic ability than their academic aptitude. Will was the first Manifest wolf Hannibal had met or even heard of that seemed to have complete control of their condition. He was not aggressive in any way, had not only attended college, but excelled in his classes, and he refused to let Hannibal treat him differently because of his nature. Most wolves, let alone Manifest, would take time off for the full moon because of the physical ramifications of the transformation.

Every new thing Hannibal discovered about Will made him want to know more. He was an entirely unique creature, and beautiful in every way.

Hannibal wondered if his interest was obvious to Will. In some ways, he hoped it was. If Will's behavior was this way with an awareness of it, then it meant Will accepted Hannibal's interest. If not, it left Hannibal with more options of influence.

If Hannibal was right about Will, he wouldn't need much of a push to embrace his darker side. His reaction to the crime scene alone would have him convinced, and there were other signs he had taken note of since Will had started working with him.

"You're very pensive," Will noted, cocking his head curiously in a way that made one of his ears flop, "is something bothering you?"

Hannibal smiled, realizing he had been quiet for a few minutes as they ate.

"Forgive me," he said, "I'm afraid I've been a neglectful host. Nothing is the matter, I am simply mulling over the details of the case. Not proper table conversation, I'm afraid."

Will smiled, a glint of mischief in his eyes.

“You don’t seem to be spoiling your own appetite, but you’re worried about spoiling mine? Come now, Doctor, we’re supposed to be working together on the profile. Do share.”

Will took a bite of his food, holding eye contact with Hannibal while he chewed and swallowed. Hannibal felt his heart skip a beat in his chest, and he was sure Will must be aware of his interest. This felt like dangerous ground he was treading, but he smiled at Will and nodded.

“Very well, but you cannot now claim you were not warned,” he said, matching Will’s humor, “I was considering the positioning of the body. I would think such a placement implies some deification of the victim, would you agree?”

Will considered it for a moment before nodding in agreement.

“Sure. An object of envy can often be elevated in the eyes of the one who envies, even to the point of deification. Why?”

Hannibal smiled.

“Well, it could be a clue as to how the killer envied the victim. The way one envies a perfect being such as a god.”

A light sparked in Will’s eyes, and he nodded with more enthusiasm, his ears flopping slightly with the motion. His tail swished a bit, betraying his excitement.

“You’re right. They wouldn’t envy anything like how she felt, or her confidence in herself. They would envy substantial, tangible attributes of her character. Maybe they envied her pleasant personality, her physical appearance, her job, or her social standing. Her opinion of any of it wouldn’t matter to them.”

Hannibal nodded thoughtfully, hoping to say something to keep Will’s brain working. He was enjoying seeing the way Will worked far more than he enjoyed the work itself.

“And perhaps we can narrow these options down further by observing the scene,” he said.

Will’s eyes glinted with interest, and his gaze grew distant for only a moment as Hannibal imagined he brought the images of the scene to the front of his mind. His eidetic memory would be serving him well in this regard as well as his usual duties each day. Hannibal wondered how detailed his memory could possibly be. Could he recall the intricate details of a pattern of cloth? Could he remember the exact positioning of someone’s clothes or hair? Hannibal would have bet money on Will being able to do all that and more. There was something exceptional contained within his skull, and Hannibal was enjoying every peek.

“It wasn’t her job, or her social standing,” Will said decisively, “Not her job, because that’s something determined by other people. Same thing with social standing. The killer didn’t care about what the world deigned to give her. Only what God gave her. Only what was encapsulated in her essence.”

Will didn't seem to be entirely aware of where he was anymore. He spoke, but not to Hannibal any longer. It was as if his mind had connected to another, the mind of the killer, and he was only a medium through which these words passed. Not the creator of them.

"She was beautiful. Aphrodite in the flesh. But more than that, she was benevolent. Selfless and giving. Caring. To be touched by her was to be touched by God. No god of the Greeks or romans was ever so pure. Even the Christian God was prone to anger, where she was not. She would not mar her features with cosmetics, nor with emotions that would distort her beauty. She forgives every trespass. Every misstep. Every wrong."

Will looked up at Hannibal, but did not see him. His eyes were dark and stormy, but he did not appear upset. If anything, his expression was one of awe.

"She would forgive me for loving her, just as she forgives me for asking her to return to heaven."

All at once, Will jumped slightly, as if falling, and he blinked rapidly. He seemed to have returned to the present. His ears, which had not moved during his slight trance along with his tail, flattened down against his skull and he shook his head slightly as if to clear it.

"Sorry," Will said, sounding more like himself as he dropped his gaze to his food and his cheeks turned slightly pink, "I didn't mean to do that."

Hannibal smiled warmly, more impressed by Will every moment they spent together.

"Not at all," Hannibal assured Will, "you have nothing to apologize for. I find your insight remarkable. It was as if I were speaking with the killer in the flesh, rather than you."

Will's ears dropped even further, almost disappearing among Will's dark curls. Now, Will was slightly pale, and Hannibal wondered what had him so frightened.

"I really shouldn't do that," Will said, fidgeting a bit and seeming spooked more than his usual nerves, "I know I can get into people's heads like that, but I shouldn't. If I do that, they stick. People stick to me, and I can't ever be rid of them again. It's been years since I let that happen, and I just did it with a killer. I don't know what part of them is going to stick."

Will sounded honestly terrified of the possibilities, and Hannibal could understand why. If what Will was saying was true, it feel as if he might wake up another person the next day. Like having multiple people fighting for dominance within his skull, and never knowing who would win the battle.

But it was also something incredibly beautiful. Will had such perfect empathy he could take on the mindset of a killer, and almost entirely become them in mind.

Hannibal was struck with the sudden and intense desire to see Will take on his mindset. To see Will become so much like Hannibal for a time. And then see how Will reacted to what he found.

“Will, the mirrors in your mind can reflect the best of yourself, not just the worst of others,” Hannibal said, trying to reassure Will despite his own curiosities.

Will looked up at Hannibal with an expression full of hope and heartbreakingly pleading. His ears perked up slightly and his wide eyes shone with something unreadable to Hannibal.

“With time, I believe you can learn to sharpen this ability into a tool,” Hannibal continued softly, using his words to soothe Will’s frayed nerves, “You have the potential to understand any person you choose. All you need is practice so you may no longer carry them with you as a burden.”

Will swallowed hard and chewed his lip. He seemed unsure of something, but his expression of hope had not wavered as Hannibal spoke.

“Can you help me?” Will asked, an innocence in those words that struck Hannibal as endearing, “can you help me learn to do it without it hurting me? If anyone can, I believe it’s you. You’re a brilliant psychiatrist.”

Hannibal nodded gently.

“Of course, Will,” he said, “I will do whatever I can to help you. I offered you my help once, and I have not rescinded it yet. All you need do is ask, and all my ability will be at your disposal.”

Will laughed softly and shook his head, his tail swishing happily behind him and his ears having returned to their usual position.

“I don’t need you to feel obligated just because you offered,” he said, “but I hope you still want to help. Because we’re friends, I hope.”

Hannibal nodded.

“We are.”

11

Will woke up, covered in sweat and trembling. He'd had a dream of being the killer, following the dead woman as she went about her day, worshiping the ground she walked on, and then killing her in her own home.

Over the past few days, after the visit to the crime scene the the subsequent mental slip when talking to Hannibal, Will had not had a full night's sleep. He continued to wake up in this state, frightened by the dreams. The images his mind conjured in relation to these horrors were even more disturbing than the actual scene had been.

Of course, Hannibal could tell he was not doing well. Every day when Will walked into the office, looking more and more fatigued, he could see the concern in Hannibal's expression. Hannibal was trying to help him, but they both knew it wouldn't be an instant cure for this problem.

Will rolled out of bed and headed into the kitchen to get a drink of water. He shook his head reflexively to dry it, seeing tiny droplets of his sweat spray outward. He sighed, knowing the smell would linger for days if he didn't wash it off the walls. His sense of smell was a curse more often than not.

Will filled a tall glass with water and drank all of it in a few gulps. He shook his head again, wincing at the thought of spreading those droplets of sweat that he would be able to smell for days. He decided it was time for a shower, so at least he would stop shaking his sweat everywhere.

When Will was done with his shower, he got ready for work, though it was a bit early and he was still tired. He really wanted to go for a run, feel the air rush around him and through his fur, but he didn't have time for that. He had difficulty keeping track of time when he was shifted, and his stamina was far better, so he would end up running for hours if he let himself go. He would have to wait.

He thought maybe he should go for a run before bed, try to wear himself out so he would sleep deeper. That might help against the dreams. He would have to try it.

And, of course, he would ask Hannibal about it.

Will took his time making and eating his breakfast, and took a slightly scenic route on his way to the office. He was still there earlier than usual, but it was close enough he didn't worry too much about it. Hannibal had never shown any disapproval of his habit of being so early, so Will didn't think he was about to tell him to cut it out any time soon.

Will went through files, organizing anything that had been slightly neglected. There wasn't much for him to do, in that vein, because he hadn't been exaggerating when he had told Jack he meant to be the perfect assistant for Hannibal. He did his job very well.

The phone rang, and Will froze in place. No one ever called this early. The office wasn't officially open, and Will didn't technically have to answer because of that.

Still…

"Doctor Lecter's office, how can I help you?" Will said cheerily into the phone, despite his bewilderment at the situation.

"You can stop helping the FBI."

Will found himself unable to speak. He didn't recognize the voice, and he was sure they were purposefully changing the way they sounded so he wouldn't easily be able to identify their voice later.

The stranger didn't wait for Will to answer, possibly not having expected him to.

"I don't want you to be in danger, but now you are. You've put yourself there. Don't do it anymore."

The line went dead, and Will dropped the phone. It hit the ground with a clack, but Will didn't hear it. He didn't hear Hannibal's car pull up, or the door open. He didn't see the man rush to him out of concern. Only when Hannibal's hands were framing his face, and Hannibal called his name did Will snap out of if.

"Will, what happened?"

Will's eyes snapped to Hannibal's and stuck.

"It was the killer," he said, "they called. They said they want me to stop helping. They said they don't want me to be in danger, but that by helping with the investigation I'm putting myself in danger. That's all they said. I don't know what to do. I don't-"

Will's breathing was speeding up, and he recognized the beginnings of a panic attack in himself. He had only had a few in his life, but he had managed to keep a lid on his anxiety for years and hadn't expected to be thrust back into this experience.

Killers giving you a veiled threat will do that, apparently.

"Will, listen to me," Hannibal said, his voice soothing to Will and making his heart slow just a touch, "you are safe. You are in the office. I am here. No one will harm you. Take a deep breath."

Will did, repeating the tactics he had learned as an anxious teen. He purposefully slowed his breathing, closing his eyes to lessen the incoming stimuli. Something that had never worked for him before, but he thought it was worth a try. Somewhat predictably, it didn't work this time either, and Will felt his anxiety spike so he opened his eyes again.

Hannibal's eyes were the color of wine in firelight. Will wasn't sure he had ever noticed that before. They even reflected red, like warm blood.

After a moment, Will had come back to himself, and he sighed softly.

“I’m sorry, Doctor Lecter,” he said, pulling away from Hannibal’s touch and shaking his head slightly.

Hannibal frowned slightly.

“Do not apologize, Will,” he admonished lightly, “you have done nothing wrong. You said the killer contacted you?”

Hannibal’s eyes flicked to the phone on the floor, and Will nodded.

“They called the office, not me,” he said, “They knew I was here. Or they knew I would be. They either saw me arrive or knew my schedule well enough to know I was here. They changed their voice so I can’t recognize them from that. They’re smart. They knew I would be alone, and that I’d answer the phone. It was to the office, so it’s my job to answer it. They knew I’ve helped with the investigation. Something happened. How did they find out?”

Hannibal sighed softly and shook his head.

“There is a particularly distasteful journalist, who makes it her personal life goal to interfere with the FBI,” Hannibal confessed, and Will felt the blood drain from his face.

“She saw me,” he said, his voice nearly inaudible, “she wrote about me? Did she include a picture?”

Hannibal didn’t look pleased about it. In fact, Will thought he seemed angry. Will had never seen him angry before. Will had only seen the aftermath of his anger.

“She did. I’m sorry, Will. I only just found out, and I had every intention of telling you today, though I had hoped to be tactful. If I could take back my actions leading to this, I would do so in a heartbeat.”

Will frowned and shook his head. He was feeling better, even to the point where he was capable of being annoyed with Hannibal.

“Don’t be silly,” he scolded, and Hannibal appeared taken aback, “you and I are going to catch this killer. You know Jack couldn’t do it without us. If we catch this killer even a day faster than Jack could have, then don’t you dare say you’d take it back. I’m not scared of them. I’m not their type.”

Hannibal tipped his head curiously.

“Why do you say that?” he asked, “what have you learned?”

Will felt himself falling. He fell into their head again, and it was so much easier this time than the last one. The first time had been like wading through mud up to his knees, and this was like walking through the shallows on the beach. There was resistance, but it had lessened.

“There are creatures that are so much more than mere humans,” he heard himself say, though it was as if his voice was far away, “they walk among us, but they are more. They are to be respected, feared, and protected. They are not gods. They are merely more than us. I have chosen to believe in gods, but this other has gotten in the way. I cannot harm them. I cannot control them. I can only pray to my gods they do not force my hand.”

“I will worship my gods until I am stopped, and this other could stop me. I beg them not to. I beg them not to stop me from showing my love.”

Will gasped and fell backward, the fall back into himself much more sudden and harsh than the fall out of himself. He crashed into the desk, reeling. His tail was between his legs and he let out a pitiful whine as he put a hand to his head and squeezed his eyes shut. Everything hurt. His head, his eyes, his ears. His entire world felt like it was on fire.

“Will,” Hannibal said, grasping Will’s shoulders and steadying him, “Will, please.”

The sound of distress in Hannibal’s voice, and his strong hands on Will’s shoulders forced him to focus on reality again. His eyes sprang open, and he caught Hannibal’s gaze.

“We’re going to catch this killer, Hannibal,” Will said, and he heard the excitement and conviction in his own voice, “You and I can catch them. You can help me get them out of my head after. We can do this, and then it’s all over. I’ll never let Jack get near us again. Everything will be fine.”

Will could hear the near frenzy in his own voice now, but his heart was racing and he couldn’t stop himself. He was speaking too fast, and too excitedly. His words were running over each other, and he wasn’t even sure he was making sense anymore, but his blood was rushing and he felt alive.

When Will saw the devastated expression on Hannibal’s features, it felt as if the weight of the world had fallen onto his shoulders again, and he nearly lost his breath. There was something wrong.

“Will. I think we need to take the day off. Both of us,” Hannibal said.

Will didn’t know what to say. He didn’t have any way to respond. His voice had stopped working, and all Will could do was stare at Hannibal with his mouth agape. After a long moment, Will just managed to nod his head, realizing it was the only reasonable decision. He wouldn’t be any good at work today.

Hannibal led Will into his office and had Will lay down on the couch. He whispered quiet reassurances to Will all the while, then left to make a phone call.

Will stared up at the ceiling for a long moment. He didn’t know how long he lay there, but eventually his mind gave way to the soft static of a dreamless sleep.

12

“What did he say the killer told him?”

Will sat up sharply with a gasp, apparently woken by the sound of Jack’s voice. He swayed a bit and put a hand to his head, and Hannibal frowned.

“Nothing entirely cohesive,” Hannibal admitted, not even looking at the agent he was speaking with. He wanted nothing more than to go to Will and make him lie back down. He was clearly unwell. “But it is clear to me whatever it was has disturbed him. I would appreciate it if you didn’t question him immediately. I believe I can help him recall it without harming him further.”

In all honesty, Hannibal didn’t know if he’d be able to do anything for Will in this case. His mind was fighting him, and Hannibal knew it was a powerful thing. The battle would be all Will’s and Hannibal would only be able to offer him support as he worked through it.

But it was fascinating. Hannibal relished the idea that he’d be able to witness this.

“I want to help,” Will said, standing on unsteady feet.

Hannibal and Jack both turned to him. Hannibal’s frown was from concern, while Jack’s was general displeasure.

“Will,” Hannibal said, hating himself for sounding so vulnerable, “you should sit back down. You’re experiencing shock.”

Will nodded, running a hand through his hair and taking a deep breath.

“I know,” he said, “that and about ten other things. But this is important.”

With that, Will turned his luminous gaze to Jack, and his eyes held such an intensity Hannibal nearly lost his breath.

“The killer thinks I can catch them. They think I’m a threat. If they haven’t called anyone in the FBI to warn you off the case, that means a lot. They’re a wolf, but not a manifest. They wish they were manifest. But they also wish they weren’t a wolf at all. They see manifest wolves as better and more powerful than everyone else, even though we’re still flawed. They see non-wolves as perfect, but weak. They can’t decide which they’d rather be. It’s tearing them apart from the inside.”

Jack was listening, but Hannibal could tell he was doubtful Will knew what he was talking about. The idea made Hannibal irrationally angry with the man, but he held his tongue for the moment.

“There’s another body. I’m sure of it. You’ll find it soon. It’s going to be another non-wolf. The killer doesn’t think they’ll be able to kill a manifest, and they’re going to ignore all other

wolves. I think we can draw them out. If I stay on the case, they'll come after me. They don't think they'll be able to kill me, but they're willing to die at my hands trying, because I might stop them."

At that idea, Jack seemed interested. Hannibal could see a plan forming in his mind, and he wanted to stop it. Jack was about to put Will in harm's way, while he was clearly suffering from something. Hannibal wouldn't stand for it.

"Jack, I think Will has given you quite enough information for the time being. You will work on tracing the call the killer made to the office?"

Jack turned to Hannibal and nodded, but it was clear he was still thinking about what Will had said.

"Yeah. We should be able to trace it, unless this killer is smarter than the average," he said, "I'll let you two get some rest now. This has been a stressful morning for you both. I'll call if I need anything else from either of you."

Hannibal saw Jack out of the office and returned to Will.

Will hadn't moved, frozen in place and his gaze distant. Hannibal was not pleased. He wouldn't have hesitated to set up a chance for Will to find this killer, if there was not clearly something deeply wrong. Hannibal wanted to deal with whatever this was before Jack thrust Will into a dangerous situation.

"The killer is smarter than that," Will said distantly, "they won't be able to trace the call."

Hannibal nodded. He thought that was very likely. He had an idea this killer was far more intelligent than Jack would believe.

"Will, I'd like to take you to my home," Hannibal said, gently taking Will's arm. He was displeased to find Will was trembling, ever so slightly.

Will nodded numbly, allowing Hannibal to lead him out of the office.

It was raining lightly now, and the world was cast in greyscale rather than the usual bright colors. Drops of water clung to Will's hair and glistened in the faint light that filtered through the clouds. He was a vision, and Hannibal would have taken time to admire it if he was not more concerned with ensuring Will's health and safety.

On the front step of Hannibal's home, Will stopped.

"Hold on a moment," he said, then leaned away from Hannibal and shook his head, spraying water outwards in a halo. The action was so canine it made Hannibal smile despite himself. It was cute.

Will's hair was ruffled and wild after that, making him appear younger and mildly debauched. The water seemed to accentuate the curl in Will's hair. Hannibal had to fight the urge to run his fingers through it.

“Come in, and I will cook something warm for us both,” Hannibal said.

Will followed, shucking off his jacket and not complaining when Hannibal took it for him. Once they were in the kitchen, Hannibal began to make soup, noting how Will was still trembling. Whether it was from being cold or not, he decided soup was the best option.

“Don’t you want me to talk about it?” Will asked, and Hannibal glanced up from his work.

Will’s brow was furrowed in confusion, and his lips were pressed together. His ears were lower than normal, and his tail twitched near his legs in a nervous movement, like he was resisting the urge to wrap it around his leg like he did when he was unhappy.

“No,” Hannibal replied, “I do not see what help it will do at the moment. I think you are ill, and require rest and healing before it would be wise for you to attempt working on the case again. I should never have brought you to a crime scene.”

Will scowled, and Hannibal had to repress a smile. He honestly didn’t regret it all that much, because he had learned more about Will and his beautiful mind since they began helping Jack together, but he didn’t want Will to be hurt by the work.

“Don’t say that,” Will said, though he didn’t sound angry at all, if anything he was just sad, “You blame yourself, as if I’m not an agent of my own actions. Every time. I’m not your pet, and I make my own decisions. So quit it.”

Hannibal stopped cooking, stunned into silence for a moment.

He knew Will was strong willed and independent, and had liked that just as much as the rest of his attributes. He had seen it in the way Will dealt with Hannibal’s patients, with Jack Crawford, and even Hannibal at times. But Will had never sounded so aggressive about something when speaking with Hannibal.

Will sounded dangerous, and Hannibal felt as if he might be falling in love.

“I’m sorry, Will,” Hannibal said, genuinely, “I hadn’t realized I made you feel that way. It was unintentional. I should have been more conscious.”

Will huffed and shook his head, more to himself than to Hannibal. It seemed like he was having an internal debate with himself, and Hannibal wondered what it was about.

“It’s not your fault. You’re the superior between us, so you feel obligated to take responsibility for all the consequences. I’m telling you to stop considering the disparity between our positions and just think of me as an equal. At least until this case is over.”

Will’s posture was more natural, now. More relaxed and confident. His ears were up again, and his tail swished lazily. He was watching Hannibal with quiet curiosity, and Hannibal was sure there was no one more beautiful in the entire world.

“Is that something you can do?” Will asked.

Hannibal came fully back to himself.

“I think so,” he answered, and Will smiled.

“I think so too,” he said with a nod, “That’s why I picked you, after all.”

Hannibal smiled as well, again filled with pleasure that Will had chosen him over others for what he could see. He finished the soup and served up a bowl for each of them. Will followed him to the small kitchen table, and they sat down. Hannibal wanted their relationship to be comfortable, and decided this would be a more intimate setting.

Will looked tired. Despite having slept in Hannibal’s office earlier, he looked absolutely exhausted. Hannibal wondered if it was possibly a side effect of when he had slipped fully into the mind of the killer. Perhaps it had drained him this way.

“Will,” Hannibal said carefully, not sure how Will would react to what he was about to suggest, “I would like you to stay here for the day. Possibly tonight as well.”

Will looked up at Hannibal, his eyes looking right through him for a moment before they cleared and focused. Then, he frowned and tipped his head.

“Why?” he asked.

Hannibal was relieved Will hadn’t immediately reacted badly.

“You are clearly exhausted. You need rest. I can only be sure you are resting if you stay here. I can be sure you are eating properly, and I can monitor you. You asked me to help you with this, and I think this would be the best way.”

Will considered that, eating a few spoonfuls of his soup before he winced. Hannibal recognized it as a reaction to a headache. A bad one. It was concerning, but not entirely surprising.

“Alright,” Will said, raising a hand to rub at his temple, “I’ll stay. I can’t promise I’ll be very good company, though. I’m feeling less like myself.”

Hannibal believed it. From the display of his skill at the office, Hannibal was amazed Will ever felt like himself. He had slipped so easily into the mind of someone he had never met. Someone he knew little about. It was a wonder he didn’t end up channeling the personalities of everyone he came into contact with over the course of the day.

“That is what I intend to help you with,” Hannibal said with a smile.

13

Will liked Hannibal's house. Everything was permeated with his scent, and the lights weren't too bright. It wasn't cold or hot, and there was lot's of room. Will really liked it.

The soup Hannibal had made was delicious, of course, and it soothed Will's nerves. He had felt frayed and disjointed, but the soup was grounding him. It filled him and strengthened him. He also really liked the thought that Hannibal had made it for him. Soup was something you made for someone you cared about, usually when they were sick.

Will *felt* sick. He felt overly warm and had a headache throbbing in the bowl of his skull. He felt like all his senses were heightened, and he was glad he was in Hannibal's house because of it. The things in Hannibal's house were soft to him. He especially liked the smells.

Hannibal drove Will to his apartment so he could pack an overnight bag, and waited in the car while Will packed. Will hadn't wanted him to come in, feeling overly conscious of his meager living space. They might be something approaching friends, but Hannibal was still Will's employer, and Will was still a mentally unstable manifest wolf. He had asked Hannibal to disregard the disparity between their positions, but he was still working on doing that himself.

Will packed quickly and went back out to where Hannibal was waiting. He felt his tail wag excitedly at the sight of the other man, and he didn't bother feeling uncomfortable about it. He just wanted to get back in the car and fill his nose with the smells of Hannibal.

"Are you ready, Will?" Hannibal asked as Will slipped into the front seat again, his tail thumping rhythmically.

Hannibal's voice was soothing, calming Will's frayed nerves and draping across his shoulders like a warm blanket. His brain pulsed painfully, but it was dull and he pushed it aside for the moment.

Will just nodded, feeling so calm he didn't want to break the feeling by speaking. Hannibal smiled, another warm thing Will liked, and they pulled away. Will smiled as well, leaning his head against the window and watching the scenery pass. The rain had stopped, leaving the world looking and smelling fresh. He breathed deeply, feeling like he could fill his lungs with Hannibal's scent and it would then transfer into his bloodstream and he could have the smell in his blood. It was intoxicating.

Classical music played from the car radio, set to a very low volume. Will thought Hannibal might have done so to encourage conversation, or perhaps simply in deference to Will's more sensitive ears. Either way, it was one more thing about Hannibal he felt calmed by, and he was pleased.

"Would you like to open the window?"

Will turned to Hannibal curiously, and found no judgment there. Hannibal hadn't asked as a barb, or an insult because of what Will was. He was genuinely offering.

Will debated whether or not to give into his own nature for a long moment, but ultimately decided this was a situation where it was safe. Hannibal would not think less of him for it.

"May I?" he asked, a bit shyly because he wasn't used to anyone being so accommodating without it being patronizing.

Hannibal smiled warmly again and rolled the window down for Will.

Will felt the cool air rush into his face and through his hair, and he angled his head into the stream of it. This was one thing he almost never allowed himself, because it felt so base, but the cool air hit his overheated skin and felt wonderful. He felt the wind blow across his scalp like caressing fingers. His tail thumped more energetically, and Will didn't care. He closed his eyes and felt the wind in his face as they drove. The coolness seemed to relieve some of the pain in his skull as well.

The only downside was that the wind diluted the scents of Hannibal, filling his nose with the fresh scents of recent rainfall and clean air. It was pleasant, but not like the smell of Hannibal.

They would be back to Hannibal's home soon, and Will could fill his lungs again.

Will was giving in to his canine behaviors more than usual.

Hannibal would have been delighted by this if Will didn't look so pale and tired. There was a thin sheen of sweat over Will's white skin, even as the cool air from outside the car blew across his face and tossed his hair about wildly.

Will wasn't well. Hannibal could see that, and it was greatly concerning to him. There was something wrong with Will Graham, and Hannibal knew he was morally obligated to do something about it.

But…

Hannibal was tempted to wait. He was curious to see how long Will would allow himself to remain ill before finding help for himself. He was curious what effects an illness would have on someone like Will. If it was nothing worse than the flu, Will would be fine.

If it was something more serious, as Hannibal already suspected due to what he had seen, this was an incredible opportunity to not only study the effects of the illness on Will's mind and behavior, but also an opening for some subtle guidance. As long as Hannibal was aware of it, Will would be in no real danger.

Regardless of the severity of Will's illness, Hannibal could offer support and comfort. In this way, he could ingratiate himself further into Will's life and become a more effective influence on him. No matter what came of this illness, malignant or benign, it would serve Hannibal's purposes.

As they walked back into Hannibal's home, he watched Will carefully.

Will lifted his nose into the air and took in deep breaths, as if savoring every smell he could gather with his incredible sense. His tail was in constant motion, and Hannibal was glad it offered an indication of how Will was feeling. He was happy, despite his illness.

"Allow me to show you the guest room," Hannibal said, and Will turned to him immediately, his ears up and attentive. He nodded again, apparently not feeling very vocal at the moment, and followed Hannibal up the stairs with his duffel bag.

"Will it smell like someone else?" Will asked as they approached the door.

Hannibal considered that for a moment, unsure what answer would please Will. He was curious to see.

"I very much doubt it," Hannibal said, opening the door to the guest room, "I do not have guests often, and I clean and air the room myself regularly."

Will nodded, apparently satisfied, and entered the room as Hannibal bid. He sniffed around a bit, curious the way an animal is in a new place. Hannibal watched from the doorway, letting Will become familiar with the area on his own.

Will's tail was still as he looked around, but it was not curled around his leg as it would be if he was unhappy. His ears were up and Hannibal thought he must just be attentive.

After a moment, Will's tail began to swish happily again, and Hannibal smiled. Will set his duffel bag by the foot of the bed and continued to sniff around a bit. Hannibal wondered what Will was smelling, or what he was looking for by it. He would have asked, but he didn't want to make Will uncomfortable. Not when he seemed so comfortable in Hannibal's home.

"Would you like to join me for a drink in the study?" Hannibal asked, and Will turned to him immediately. His ears were up and attentive.

"Sure," Will said with a nod that flopped his ears back and forth.

Hannibal smiled and led Will to the study. He poured a glass of whiskey for Will, having gathered it was his preferred beverage, and a glass of wine for himself. Will accepted the glass with wide, curious eyes, and sniffed it experimentally.

"You don't have to waste the good stuff on me," Will said, a blush rising to his cheeks as he was unable to meet Hannibal's eyes, "I wouldn't know the difference."

Hannibal laughed softly and shook his head.

"You recognized it from scent alone," he said, "and I wouldn't consider it a waste regardless."

Will took a sip, then smiled.

“I bet you don’t even own anything less expensive than this,” he said, “I think it would be an affront to your taste to even consider buying it.”

Hannibal smiled and took a sip of his wine, offering no confirmation or denial. Will’s wit didn’t seem to be hindered at all by whatever illness he had.

Hannibal lit a fire in the fireplace, the weather just cool enough to make it comfortable instead of stifling. Hannibal liked the lighting provided by a fire, and the radiating warmth from the flame as opposed to the kind of heat provided by a central furnace.

Will stared at the flame for a long moment, seemingly fixated. The light shone back out of his eyes, turning them into silver coins in his face. It might have been an eerie sight, but Hannibal only found it beautiful. Then, Will settled onto the floor in front of the fireplace, his tail thumping softly against the rug as he cradled his whiskey in his hands. He moved close to the fire, presumably to get warm despite the fact Hannibal could see a sheen of sweat across his skin still. He probably had a fever.

“You wouldn’t be this nice to just anyone,” Will said distantly, almost as if he was unaware of the words, “I can see that. For whatever reason, you actually like me. You go out of your way to do what you think will please me. I’m curious what might motivate you to do that.”

Will didn’t sound as if he needed or expected a response. He didn’t seem to be searching for an answer to satiate his curiosity just then. Hannibal watched him for a long moment, taking a seat in one of the armchairs that sat near the fireplace, giving him a view of Will’s profile.

Will was stunning.

“You do much the same for me,” Hannibal remarked casually, “I have noticed your tendency to do whatever you can for my benefit. I suppose we are only reciprocating that which we receive.”

Will didn’t answer, just taking sips of whiskey and staring into the fire. He looked far calmer than Hannibal could remember seeing him, and he was pleased Will could be so while in his home. This illness would be an interesting experiment.

14

Will woke up and it was dark outside. He was momentarily confused as to where he was, but then the smells reminded him.

He was in Hannibal's house, in his guest room. Because he had not been feeling well after getting that call from the killer. The killer that thought he was something special, and didn't want to hurt him. But they would if he got in their way.

Will was feeling a bit better, despite apparently not being able to sleep through the night. He didn't feel as if he had a fever anymore, though he was a bit chilly.

In hindsight, Will supposed he should have told Hannibal when he thought he was feverish, but he hadn't. He had just gone along with what Hannibal wanted.

Will hopped down off the bed, sniffing the air and knowing there was a fire in the study. That would mean Hannibal was still up, or had woken early. Will didn't know what time it was. He decided to join Hannibal, so he could sit by the fire again and warm up. He might tell Hannibal about the fever too, if he decided it was necessary.

Will padded down the hall and the stairs, finding the study more by following the smell of the fire and of Hannibal than his memory. He still felt as if he were halfway asleep, and wasn't sure he would have been awake enough to find his way otherwise.

Will saw Hannibal sitting at the desk, and he looked up as Will entered. Will smiled and made his way to the fireplace. He could feel Hannibal's gaze following him as he curled up in the warmth of the fire.

Will felt a bit more drowsy, now that he was warmer. He began to drift off, not noticing the odd expression Hannibal wore as he did so.

Will woke up for the second time and stretched, feeling his spine and shoulders pop. He gave his head one good shake to rid himself of sleep, and looked around. The fire was still going, which meant Hannibal had tended it while Will slept. Sunlight streamed in through the windows, leaving bright pools on the floor.

Hannibal was there, but he had moved to the couch at Will's back. He held what Will guessed to be a sketchbook on his lap, and smiled warmly when Will turned to look at him.

"How are you feeling this morning, Will?" Hannibal asked.

Will opened his mouth to answer, and apologize for sleeping on the floor when he had been offered a perfectly good bed, but he stopped when he looked down at his hands.

They were paws.

Will had shifted at some point over the night without even realizing it. He must have looked like a regular dog to Hannibal. A shaggy dog with dark fur.

Will had never shifted on accident before, and hadn't even known that was possible. He was so startled he nearly shifted back right there, before he realized it would leave him entirely unclad on Hannibal's rug.

Will moved so he was sitting, casting a worried and confused glance at Hannibal.

"I gather from your reaction you were not aware of your state," Hannibal noted.

Will nodded. He forced himself not to give voice to the helpless whine that sat in the back of his throat. He didn't want to seem so pitiful in front of Hannibal.

Hannibal stood and placed his sketchbook on the desk.

"I will go prepare breakfast," he said, as if nothing at all strange was going on, "I'll leave you to prepare yourself in any way you need."

At the door, Hannibal looked back at Will.

"We needn't talk about this if you don't wish to," he said, and left.

Will waited until he could hear Hannibal moving around in the kitchen, then slowly made his way to the door. He poked his muzzle out first, as if there might be someone in the hall waiting for him, then made his way back upstairs to the guest room he had fallen asleep in the night before.

The bed was a mess, though Will was relieved to see he hadn't damaged anything. His sleepwear was also undamaged, as if he had kicked it off in his sleep rather than shifting within them. Will pushed the door closed and shifted back, a hot blush rising to his skin now that he was human again.

"What the hell," he said to himself softly, bewildered.

His senses were still stronger than usual. He hadn't noticed they had changed, but in hindsight the past day had been filled with scents and sounds he wouldn't normally have noticed. They were how he experienced the world when shifted.

Will dressed and washed his face, trying not to panic about what this all meant. He shook his head to throw the water off, wincing as droplets hit the walls of Hannibal's fancy bathroom. He was causing Hannibal more problems than he had wanted to. All he could do now was try to deal with it as best he could. On his own.

By the time he was done, Will could smell something amazing being cooked downstairs.

Hannibal considered this morning's occurrences.

He had been surprised to see the large dog walk into the study at barely four in the morning, but had recognized it as Will by his mannerisms. He had thought it strange that Will would have changed and decided to sleep on the floor instead of remain in his room, but hadn't objected to it.

Will had fallen right back to sleep, and Hannibal had drawn him as he lay there.

Will had seemed so comfortable and happy, laying by the fire with a thick coat of fur keeping him warm. He had looked at home. Hannibal had never considered having a dog, and didn't feel the desire for one now, but he wouldn't be opposed to seeing Will that way again. While Will had been unmistakably himself in that form, he had moved with an ease he didn't seem to possess every day. As if that skin fit him far better than the one that seemed human.

Will had not changed intentionally. That much was clear. It posed an interesting set of questions, to do with whether this was due to his physical illness or merely the stress of the previous day. Hannibal was curious about what he might learn about Will from this, and wondered if Will would talk about it or not.

Will entered the kitchen, his head down and his face still tinted with a blush. His ears flicked nervously, catching every sound Hannibal made, and his tail was curled around his leg.

"Sorry about that," Will mumbled, and Hannibal smiled warmly.

"No apology is necessary," he replied honestly, "I was not inconvenienced or uncomfortable. I fear I may have made you uncomfortable, or exacerbated your discomfort in some way by not addressing the issue earlier. I was unsure how to respond."

Will lifted his head, his eyes wide.

"No," he said quickly, "You didn't do anything wrong. Really. I don't know what's wrong with me. I can't believe I shifted without realizing it, then just walked through your house. I'm lucky you didn't kick me out the moment you saw me."

Hannibal tipped his head, portioning out their breakfast onto plates.

"Would you have expected me to?" he asked, genuinely curious.

Will considered that for a long moment, accepting the plate when Hannibal offered it.

"No," he said at length, "not you. Anyone else, probably."

Hannibal was satisfied with that, and pleased. Will did not see him as coldhearted, when others would have been.

"What do you suppose caused this?" Hannibal asked, genuinely curious to hear Will's opinion.

There wasn't nearly enough information about Manifest Wolves when it came to nearly anything, but especially in the medical field. Their rarity and general aversion to being

studied left doctors woefully uninformed in the area. They also seemed to be heartier than others, and less prone to physical illness.

Which all made this an exceptionally rare opportunity.

Will sighed, and his ears dropped a bit.

“I’m not sure,” he admitted, “yesterday I think I ran a fever, but it could have been brought on by stress and shock from the phone call. I guess those could have also been the catalyst for the unexpected shift, but it’s strange to me. I’ve never done that before, and I haven’t heard of it happening to any other wolves, manifest or otherwise.”

Hannibal had never heard such a thing either, but it could come down to the scarcity of information at his disposal. He thought he would have to dig around a bit to see if there was anything on the subject he was unaware of.

“Are you feeling well this morning?” he asked.

Will frowned a bit as he considered.

“I was feeling better when I was shifted,” he said, “And I don’t know if I feel worse now just due to the stress from this morning. My head hurts a bit.”

Hannibal would have wagered Will was downplaying his own illness, but he thought it possible Will hadn’t yet realized the extent. He again looked pale, and sweat was gathering at his temples. He did not yet look as poorly as he had the day before, but Hannibal thought that may be temporary.

Will took a bite of food and his ears perked up again. His tail gave a lazy swish and Hannibal smiled.

“What’s the plan for today, Doctor?” Will asked, apparently in the mood to talk about something else.

Before Hannibal had a chance to answer, Will’s phone rang.

Will’s ears laid back for a moment, showing his displeasure as he pulled it from his pocket.

“It’s Agent Crawford,” he told Hannibal, and turned slightly away to answer it.

“Doctor Lecter’s office, this is Will Graham,” he said, slightly less energetic than usual.

Will listened to Jack on the other end for a moment, his ears laying down slowly as Crawford talked.

“I’ll have to discuss it with Doctor Lecter before I answer definitively,” he said, “let me have an hour or so and I’ll get back to you.”

Jack said something else, and Will bared his teeth for a moment. He quickly schooled his expression again, and responded.

“Doctor Lecter made it very clear that I am working jointly with him,” Will said, deceptively calm in tone, “you may either have us both, or him alone. I have a job, Agent Crawford, and I don’t intend to find a new one any time soon.”

Will ended the call and took another bite of his food, frowning down at his plate as if it had personally offended him. Hannibal waited patiently for Will to explain what had happened. He had a pretty good idea, but he was patient.

“There’s another body,” Will said at length, “just like I said there would be. Jack wants to know if we can go while the scene is fresh.”

Hannibal hummed in consideration, taking a sip of coffee.

“I gather he also suggested I may not be necessary,” he said.

Will set his fork down with a clatter that made him wince, probably exacerbating his headache. He bared his teeth again in a snarl.

“It’s absolute bullshit,” he snapped, “you’re the one Jack wanted to begin with, and you’re actually an *expert* . He didn’t want me to be there in the first place. Not to mention, you made it clear he shouldn’t try asking me anything like that.”

Hannibal was fascinated. He had never seen Will act truly angry before. He had been frustrated or irritated, but never truly angry. Hannibal knew Will tried to hide his anger, afraid of being like everyone expected him to be. He was beautiful in his anger.

“We can refuse to help today,” Hannibal offered, “you are not feeling well, and I have patients to attend to.”

Will looked up, then, and met Hannibal’s eyes. There was a fierce determination there, in his bright blue eyes.

“No,” he said, sounding calm again, “If we don’t, it will be like showing weakness. Running away. We can refuse if that’s what you decide is best, but I think we should go. I’m going to need you to play a role this time, to get Jack off my back. If you’re up for it.”

Hannibal leaned forward, intrigued. He wondered what role he might be asked to play for Will’s plan. He was fascinated by Will’s intelligence and determination to best Jack in this game he was creating.

15

“Doctor Lecter,” Jack said, his smile only slightly forced, “Will Graham. Thank you for coming. I’m sorry for the short notice. Just this way.”

It was another small house in the city, very similar to the one the previous body had been found in. Jack led them through to the bedroom, and Will set eyes on the body.

It was a man this time, and he had also been strangled. He was sitting in a chair by the window, which had the curtains drawn back to let the light in. A bold move by the killer, exposing them to potential witnesses. His head was tilted way back, so he was staring at the ceiling, his hands on the arms of the chair with his palms up. Will knew the position was entirely intentional, and he looked up at the message above the man.

It was written on the wall above his head, instead of the ceiling. This message was not meant for the dead man. It was meant for whoever saw him after his death.

As good as a rest.

A change is as good as a rest. That is what the completed phrase was. Something in that phrase is what the killer was trying to tell them.

Tell Will.

Change. This was about change. There was something the killer wanted to change.

“What do you think, Will?” Jack asked.

Will’s ear twitched at his being addressed, but he didn’t otherwise respond. He just continued to stare at the scene, waiting.

Hannibal studied the scene beside Will, contemplating everything he saw. His presence was solid and shielding, and Will allowed himself to be smaller. Hannibal’s presence could fill a room, and Will could stay comfortably in the sidelines.

“What do you see?” Hannibal asked quietly.

Will turned to Hannibal, noticing Jack’s irritation in his periphery. Exactly what he had been going for.

“It’s all about change,” Will answered, loud enough Jack could easily hear him, though it was clear he was speaking to Hannibal, “They want to bring about a change. I can see them much more clearly now. The killer knows the victims. The victims would recognize the killer. They might work together, or ride the same bus, or always get coffee at the same shop. They are members of the same social class as the victims. They probably have a house much like this one, and a life much like that of the victims. A low level business job, working in a cubicle and doing the same thing every day. Monotony.”

Hannibal nodded, surveying the scene. Will didn't know if he could see the same things, and came to the same conclusions, but it seemed like Hannibal agreed at least on the grounds of Will having a different insight.

"What else?" Hannibal asked, and Will looked around.

There wasn't much there at the moment. Nothing new, at least. But that was telling in and of itself.

"They have true and trusted methods for everything," Will said, "they're a creature of habit in everything. They will have a regular order for coffee, and breakfast, and they'll eat the same lunch every day. They wear similar clothes every day, and everyone else thinks they're implicitly boring. They have a routine for killing as well. A habit. They know what has worked in the past, so they do it again."

Then, Will felt a dawning understanding. A true image of the killer bloomed in his skull.

"They envy the victims for their ability to be spontaneous," he said, and Hannibal looked at him curiously, "they can't seem to break from routine, unless they are creating a new one. When they killed the first time, it was a change, but now it's their routine. The victims probably went out with friends on the spur of the moment, or took vacations on short notice. They do what the killer can't."

And there was more. Because the victims were not wolves, they were not bound to the moon. Werewolves were tied to the moon and had to plan their lives around it. But not Manifest. Manifest wolves didn't have to obey the whims of the lunar body. They had much more freedom.

Being a non-manifest wolf, the killer felt trapped in routine by their very nature. Nothing they did felt as if it was their choice. They were always controlled by some outside influence.

"If you don't catch the killer before the next full moon, there's going to be a massacre," Will said, finally turning to Jack.

Jack was not pleased with how Will had been acting, but Will could see he was satisfied with the amount of information he had gained from his insight. He was irritated, but justified.

"Then how do we catch them?"

Will waited, knowing it would make Jack angry, but needing to make his point.

Hannibal stepped closer to Will, and Will took a deep breath in to fill his lungs with Hannibal's scent.

"Will, how do we find the killer?" Hannibal asked softly.

Will closed his eyes and considered it.

"Send me," he said.

That, at least, Jack seemed to be on board with. Hannibal, on the other hand, frowned. Will had expected as much, but he knew he had to be the bait. If they wanted to catch this killer, they needed to spur them to act, and know where they would be directing their next attack. The killer had already expressed an interest in Will's involvement, and Will knew he could do it.

"Send an agent or officer to the places the victims frequented, and send me with them," Will continued, "I might be able to recognize them from something they do or say, but they will definitely recognize me. If they see me in person, they will try to come after me in some way or another. Then, we can get them."

Will turned to Jack again.

"What evidence to you have that could nail them?" he asked.

Jack cleared his throat, clearly excited about this development.

"We've found a few hairs that don't belong to the first victim, and there's a matching one on this guy. We have a partial print from the first scene and another partial from another finger here. We might be able to match handwriting if we get a suspect. If they try to hurt you, we can detain them. What's the likelihood they'll confess if we get them?"

Will considered that for a long moment, staring at the dead man's chin.

"It depends on who interrogates them."

Will could feel Hannibal's disapproval the way one can sense a cliff, the sudden lack of matter before them deeply unsettling. He didn't like it, but he wanted to catch this killer and get it over with.

"I want to make something clear at this point," Hannibal said to Jack, though it was clear he wanted Will to listen as well, "Will is not to be put in an interrogation room with the killer. After the killer is in custody, Will is no longer involved. You are already asking too much from him, but I believe he will succeed. He is capable, but I will not see his mind put in more danger than necessary."

Well, that was that. Hannibal was playing his part well, and Will got the feeling it wasn't entirely an act. He really didn't want Jack to keep using Will. He was drawing a line in the sand, and Jack would regret trying to cross it. Will suppressed a smile at the thought, and continued acting as he needed to.

Jack clearly wanted to argue, but he refrained for the time being.

Will could feel a headache building in his skull, and he hoped they wouldn't be much longer, though he knew they weren't likely to be done yet if Jack had anything to say about it.

"Fine," Jack said, though Will could tell he hadn't dropped the subject, "Do you think the killer would react to Doctor Lecter, since he seems to have a close connection to Will?"

Jack let the question be addressed to the room, apparently having caught on to Will's game. This way, he wasn't asking Will, so he wouldn't be made a fool of.

Hannibal turned to Will, his expression curious. Will guessed he wasn't sure what the answer to that question was, and thought Will would know. As much as Will enjoyed being helpful, he was feeling tired and wanted this to be over. He smiled wanly and shrugged.

"They might," he said, "only way to know is to try."

Jack seemed pleased, and Hannibal seemed concerned. Jack turned away and continued on with his work, doing whatever it was he did when someone else had done the hard work for him. Hannibal stepped closer to Will and lowered his voice to speak to him.

"You look unwell, Will," he said, "how are you feeling?"

Will shook his head.

"Not great," he admitted, "I think I need-"

Will cut off, lifting his nose to the air. He smelled something new. Something that didn't belong.

Will moved over closer to the chair where the body sat. He crept closer, sniffing the air, searching.

"What is it, Will?" Hannibal asked, following at a distance.

"It's something," Will said, sniffing again, "something familiar. It's a plant. Something that grows in the south. I know it."

Will sniffed a bit more, wracking his brain for what it was. It was faint, just barely there under the smells of the dead man and all the agents that had been in and out of the scene. Will closed his eyes and inhaled, trying to remember what it was.

"Bee balm," he said, opening his eyes and turning to face Hannibal, "It grows wild in Louisiana. It's not as common 'round here, and it doesn't grow in the city areas."

Hannibal hummed in thought.

"Why do you imagine you can smell it here, then?" he asked.

Will frowned and rubbed his brow. The headache was making it harder to think, but he was trying.

"Uh, the killer. It's from them. It doesn't match anything about this victim. I bet it was there at the first scene too, but I didn't notice," he said, "so. The-the killer. They must have some. They'd have to grow it on a balcony or a-a front porch. It can grow in pots, and we know they have a place in the city, so that's what it has to be."

Will massaged his temples, willing the headache to abate. He was so preoccupied with his thoughts of the killer and the pain in his skull, he didn't even notice Hannibal step up to him. Hannibal took Will's hands into his own, pulling them away from his skull. Will nearly jumped out of his skin, then saw Hannibal's expression of worry.

"Will, you are ill. You need rest."

Will sighed and nodded.

"Yeah. You're right. Jack shouldn't need me until tomorrow at earliest. I should be able to get some rest if you don't need me at the office. I can come in if you're having patients, and I'll be fine."

Hannibal frowned disapprovingly, and Will felt his ears lay down in shame. He hadn't meant to make Hannibal disappointed. He just hated feeling like a burden, and that's what he was right now. He wasn't helping Hannibal at all. Hannibal was helping him.

"I mean, yeah. I'll rest. I need to rest. Whatever you say, Doctor Lecter."

Hannibal's frown deepened, and he shook his head with a soft sigh.

"Let's go, Will."

16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal was rethinking his decision to allow Will's illness to cultivate.

While it was fascinating, the way the fever seemed to be elevating his canine abilities and instincts, it had developed incredibly quickly and was now a detriment. He was confused, even as he made stunning connections. Hannibal believed he was more vulnerable to the minds of the killers in this state, and wouldn't have Will fall too deeply if it was not into his own mind. This killer was not worthy of Will, and he would not have them blur together.

Hannibal admitted to himself that the reaction Will had shown to Hannibal's displeasure had no small sway over him.

Will's ears had fallen flat, as if he had been slapped or berated. All Hannibal had done was frown, and Will had immediately backed down. He had reverted to calling Hannibal by his formal title, not in deference to Jack because the agent had not been within earshot. It had stung Hannibal, though he wouldn't have expected it to.

Hannibal didn't want that from Will. He wanted Will to be confident and powerful, just as he had been when they first began dealing with Jack. He wanted Will to know his own capabilities.

Will had broken out in another sweat on the drive back to Hannibal's home, and he was pale again.

"They'll confess to you," Will said, and Hannibal glanced over at him as they pulled up to the house.

Will was staring out the windshield, his eyes focused on the middle distance. Hannibal wasn't sure he was entirely there.

"They think I'm special, and so are you," Will continued, "You're connected to me. I'm a Manifest, and you're just a regular person who somehow got close to me. They'll want to know how. You have to humor them. Lead them on until they confess. You can do it. You're the only person I believe is smart enough to pull it off."

Hannibal felt a warm ache in his chest at those words. Will sounded sad and resigned, his tail still by his leg and his ears low on his had. He didn't sound like himself at all.

"Come inside," Hannibal said, "let me cook for you."

Will didn't reply, but he followed Hannibal into the house. Hannibal wasn't pleased with this indifference. Will was clearly deep inside himself, and Hannibal wanted to follow. He wished he could.

“I should go,” Will said distantly, leaning towards the hall, as if he meant to gather his things from the guest room. His eyes were glassy with fever, and he didn’t seem all there.

“Absolutely not,” Hannibal said, taking Will’s arm gently but firm, “I am going to cook for you, and I think we should discuss a few things.”

Will went along, but his eyes cleared and he frowned.

“You don’t have to pretend to be my handler anymore,” he said, and Hannibal pulled his hand away. That stung him more than when Will had used his formal title. “Jack isn’t around to be fooled. I can handle myself.”

Hannibal curled his hand into a fist by his side, setting his jaw and trying not to show how hurt he felt. He wasn’t used to anyone being capable of hurting him in this way, and he was not enjoying it at all.

“If that is what you want,” Hannibal said, “I will not stop you. You need rest. Perhaps we can talk when you are feeling better.”

Will turned and walked to the guest room, leaving Hannibal standing on his own.

Hannibal was struck with loneliness so stark it ached. He had never felt his own loneliness so intensely before. It was not just that Will was absent, but that it had felt as if Hannibal had been rejected by him. Will had turned his back and refused Hannibal’s company.

Something must be done about Will’s illness.

Will reemerged, his bag slung over his shoulder and his head down to avoid eye contact with Hannibal. Hannibal wanted to say something, make him stay, but he didn’t know what he could do.

“I’ll drive you, as you do not have your car,” Hannibal said, reaching for his keys.

Will shook his head adamantly, his ears flopping with the motion.

“No,” he said, then paused to take in a deep breath, his head angling to possibly smell something better, “I’ll be fine. I’ll call a cab or something. I need to clear my head.”

Hannibal’s hand fell limp at his side, and he felt peculiarly helpless. He was powerless to get his way. Forcing Will to accept his help would only push him further away, and work against Hannibal in the long run. Hannibal walked Will to the front door, wanting to say something. Wanting to keep Will from leaving. But he did nothing.

“Take care of yourself, Will,” he said softly as Will walked out the door.

Will just nodded, his head still down.

Then, he was gone. Will was out, walking down the street with his bag in his hand and his tail between his legs. Hannibal didn’t know if he actually planned to call a cab, or walk all the way to the office where his car was.

Hannibal wanted to follow him, if only to be sure he arrived home safely. But Will might notice him, and Hannibal couldn't predict how he would react. It was a breach of boundaries, and might offend Will.

It was unusual for Hannibal to feel so thoroughly powerless, and he mentally cursed Will for it. He hated the fact that anyone had this level of influence over him.

Will did end up walking all the way to the office, though he didn't remember the journey later. One moment he was walking away from Hannibal's home, biting his tongue until it bled to stop himself from whining at the loss of Hannibal's company, and the next he had been sitting in his car. His tongue had been torn and painful, and a bit of blood had stained his lower lip.

Sitting in his car, in the parking lot of Hannibal's office, Will had allowed himself to whine. A high, pitiful sound escaped him, trapped in the car with only his ears to catch it.

Will shook himself and drove home, frightened by the thought of losing any more time or forgetting where he was. He was terrified of doing something when he wasn't himself. He had worked so hard to control his own nature, to defeat his natural impulses and become something other than what society would brand him.

If he couldn't remember what he was doing or where he had been, he couldn't be sure he wasn't hurting someone or scaring them.

Will made himself some food and ate it, wishing he had stayed with Hannibal. He didn't even know why he hadn't. Hannibal wanted to help, and Will had brushed him off. Will had been downright rude, and he knew Hannibal hated that. Will didn't understand why this was happening. He didn't understand why he was doing the things he was.

Will showered and dressed in comfortable clothes, and spent a few hours just pacing the length of his apartment restlessly. He was afraid of going to sleep, because he couldn't be sure he wouldn't do something unconsciously. He didn't want to relinquish what little control he had over himself.

Eventually, Will laid in bed, knowing he really did need to rest some if he was going to get better. Hannibal was right about that, and Will knew it. Sleep was essential for anyone who was sick, and Will needed to get better as quickly as possible. It wasn't just Hannibal who needed him to be functional, now. Jack Crawford and the FBI also needed him. He was the key to getting this killer to show themselves.

Will lay in bed, his heart pounding and his mind racing, for a few hours before he finally managed to fall asleep.

Will thrashed and sweated, his dreams full of death and violence. He woke several times, heart racing in panic, but he wouldn't remember any of it later. He slipped in and out of the killer's mind, seeing them and their life flash across his eyelids like a film. Images of death

seared into his mind, thing that would stick with him even when he woke. Things he would remember, entirely without context or purpose. Will would never be rid of these ideas.

Will eventually slipped into a deep sleep. He was dead to the world when his body shifted into the form of a large shaggy dog.

Chapter End Notes

Genuine question: Should I create a playlist based on this fic? I was thinking of making playlists for some of my fics, but I don't know if anyone would care. I have a somewhat... strange music taste as well. Eccentric. So it's whatever.
<3 <3

17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal was in the kitchen, making himself breakfast and fretting over how to deal with Will's illness, when he heard the scratching at his door. He stopped, tipping his head to listen. The sound came again, and Hannibal frowned. He walked to the front door and opened it, simultaneously surprised and unsurprised to see a large shaggy dog on the front stoop.

Rain was falling heavily, and the dog seemed to have been out for a while. It was soaked to the bone, but Hannibal still recognized him. Far be it from him to understand why Will had shown up in his dog form at this hour of the morning, in the pouring rain.

"Will," Hannibal said, stepping back quickly to let him in, "come in and warm up. You must be cold. Allow me to get a few towels."

Will crept in, his tail between his legs and his body low to the ground as if he wanted to take up as little space as possible. Hannibal closed the door and fetched a stack of towels, returning to the foyer as quickly as he could. Will was laying on the floor, a pool of water gathering around him. His head was between his front paws, and he looked up at Hannibal with clear apprehension.

"Oh Will," Hannibal said, kneeling beside him to begin drying him off.

Will whined, the sound piercing Hannibal's chest and making his lungs feel tight. Will pulled away from Hannibal when he reached to begin drying him, whimpering softly.

"You cannot shift back, can you?" Hannibal asked, and Will shook his head miserably. He was a sorry sight, dripping wet and ashamed. Hannibal knew he was going to help him in any way he could. Something had to be done. "I'll call someone. I know a neurologist who may be able to help. But first, you must get dried and warmed up. Please let me help you."

Will's ears dropped against his skull, but he didn't move away when Hannibal reached to dry him again.

Will didn't smell like wet dog as strongly as a regular dog would, his scent more subdued and earthy. It was a small mercy, as Hannibal would have been displeased to have such a smell linger in his home. Even if it was an opportunity to help Will.

Hannibal had not touched Will the last time he had seen him in this form, and he had mourned the lost opportunity. He hadn't wanted to overstep his bounds, but now he was able to do so without worrying.

Will's body in this form was firm with toned muscles, and soft with thick fur. Hannibal rubbed the towel through the fur, then another when the first was soaked through. He moved up to Will's head, and massaged Will's ears, drawing the rain out of the thick fur there.

Will's tail gave a few beats against the floor, and his mouth opened in a dog-like approximation of a smile. Hannibal smiled back, fascinated by Will's sharp canine teeth. He guessed Will enjoyed this attention to his ears, perhaps enjoying the entire process as a dog would.

Hannibal wondered if Will would react positively to this kind of touch when not in this shifted form. Would Will smile and close his eyes, humming in pleasure as Hannibal rubbed his ears and scalp?

Hannibal filed it away for later contemplation and continued drying Will off.

When he was satisfied, Hannibal led Will to the study and lit a fire. Will curled up in front of the fire, making a canine huff of satisfaction, and Hannibal went back to the kitchen to finish breakfast and make a call.

"Hello?"

"Donald," Hannibal said pleasantly, "I do apologize for calling so early in the morning, but I fear it may be urgent. Could I impose on you for a favor?"

Sutcliff made a curious sound, and Hannibal heard a drawer of a desk closing on the other end.

"I'll certainly do my best, Hannibal," he said, "what kind of emergency are we talking about?"

Hannibal smiled to himself. He had known Sutcliff would be accommodating.

"A friend of mine is suffering from an illness which I believe to be encephalitis, but I cannot be entirely sure. I would appreciate it if you could fit us in for an appointment, perhaps an MRI."

Sutcliff paused for a moment, considering this.

"Hannibal Lecter, unsure of a diagnosis? I'm intrigued. Why can't you be sure?" he asked.

Hannibal sighed softly.

"He is a Manifest wolf," he admitted, "and there is little to no information on how such an illness would affect someone of that nature. It has surely been much more aggressive and quickly progressive than I would expect from someone as human as you or I. His symptoms are strange as well."

"Huh," Sutcliff said, "That's certainly interesting. I'll put you in right away. Come by as soon as possible. What kind of strange symptoms?"

Hannibal paused.

"He is currently unable to shift out of his domestic form."

That earned a long pause from Sutcliff, which Hannibal had expected. This kind of thing was basically unheard of, and entirely unstudied. Hannibal knew Sutcliff would be curious, anxious to see for himself, and might not know exactly how to help.

“That’s a concern,” Sutcliff mumbled, and Hannibal heard papers shifting around, “I’ll call a few specialists, see if I can get their opinions on short notice. If we can get him shifted back, that would be best for the scan. I don’t know how to read a dog’s scan, but I’ll make do if that’s what I’ve got to work with. If I can’t make heads or tails of it, I’ll send it to the specialists and get a consensus. Bring him in right away. Let’s see what we can do.”

Hannibal smiled.

“Thank you very much, Donald,” he said, “I’ll have you for dinner sometime.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Sutcliff replied, a grin evident in his tone.

The call ended, and Hannibal finished breakfast. He portioned some out onto a second plate for Will. He guessed Will had woken up in this state, and therefore hadn’t had a chance to eat anything. Far be it from Hannibal to understand how he had left his apartment in the first place, Will must be hungry.

Hannibal entered the study and smiled at the sight of Will curled up in front of the fire. His fur was slightly ruffled from Hannibal rubbing it down with the towel, but he looked comfortable and content. Hannibal was again struck with the thought that he wouldn’t mind seeing Will like this often. He would like it.

“Will,” Hannibal said, and Will lifted his head to look at him curiously, “would you like some breakfast? I imagine you have not yet had the opportunity to eat something.”

Will nodded, seeming sheepish even in this state. His mannerisms were not so altered between forms, apparently. It amused and pleased Hannibal, showing this was indeed the same creature he had been intrigued by from the first day.

Hannibal sat on the couch and set Will’s plate on the floor, momentarily worried Will would find it insulting. He was quickly reassured, as Will didn’t hesitate even a bit before he began eating.

It was fascinating to watch, though Hannibal tried not to stare. Will didn’t eat like a dog, exactly. It was more purposeful and slower. He took time to understand what he was eating, and not make a mess of himself or the floor around the plate. Hannibal appreciated the consideration, and wondered if Will knew of these mannerisms.

“I spoke with a colleague while I was preparing breakfast,” Hannibal said, and Will looked up at him. He tipped his head, so his ears flopped just a bit in that way Hannibal found endearing when he was in human form. “He is a neurologist. Based off of my own experience, I believe we are dealing with encephalitis, though I have never seen any Manifest with the illness, so I cannot be sure. He has agreed to see you as soon as we can make the trip.”

Will chuffed softly, the sound inquisitive. Hannibal sighed and shook his head.

“I wish I knew what you would like me to clarify,” he said, “There are a few details I need to discuss with you as well. For instance, it would be simpler for him if you were in human form for the scan he recommends. If you are unable to shift, that could make things slightly more complicated.”

Will chuffed again, turning in a small circle. It was clear he was trying to communicate something, and Hannibal was at a loss.

“Do you have an idea of how I may be able to help you shift back?” he asked.

Will bobbed his head in an approximation of a nod. Hannibal took that as a hesitant yes.

“You will need something to wear once you shift,” Hannibal said, and Will gave a sure nod at that, “I’ll find something for you, before we do anything else.”

Hannibal picked up the now empty plate from the floor and brought the dishes to the kitchen. Will followed him, apparently warm enough now. His paws padded across the floor softly behind Hannibal, remarkably quiet for such a large creature aside from the soft click of his claws on the floor. Will’s back nearly came up to Hannibal’s hip and his head reached Hannibal’s sternum when he raised it, extraordinarily tall for a regular dog. Hannibal wondered how he compared to other Manifest domestic forms.

Hannibal led Will through the house, to his own room. He walked to his closet to find something he could offer Will. Something comfortable and not overly formal. He wanted something Will wouldn’t feel guilty for borrowing.

In his periphery, Hannibal saw Will sniffing around the room. Under other circumstances, he would have considered it rude, but he remembered the way Will had been acting since becoming ill, and forgave it. He likely wasn’t even aware he was behaving that way, and Hannibal was fine with Will acting familiar in his space. It was better than the strange distance Will had put between them the day before.

“Here,” Hannibal said, turning to Will with a set of pajamas in his hands, “these should suffice.”

Will padded over and sniffed at the clothes. His ears immediately perked up, and his tail wagged.

Hannibal realized Will must enjoy his scent.

He hadn’t considered it before, but reflection on recent happenings supported the idea. Will seemed to like things and places that smelled of Hannibal, and Hannibal’s home. It had become more prominent since he became ill, and his senses had been heightened.

The thought cheered Hannibal a bit, the idea that Will found comfort in something so uniquely Hannibal’s that he would not find it elsewhere.

“Do you think you may be able to shift, if you were to try now?” Hannibal asked.

Will chuffed and turned in a circle. Hannibal took that as something to the effect of “we won’t know until I try”.

“I’ll allow you to use the guest room again,” Hannibal said, walking back to the door and into the hall, “so you may have privacy.”

Will followed, his head up now and seeming more energetic than he had since arriving. Hannibal hoped that was a sign of improvement.

Hannibal set the clothes down on the bed and turned to leave. Will walked in and sniffed around the room curiously. Hannibal wondered if this was a ritual he would perform whenever entering a new room, or if it served some particular purpose.

“You may come out whenever you are ready,” Hannibal said, “I will prepare to leave as well. Meet me in the kitchen?”

Will turned back and nodded, his ears twitching a bit. Hannibal nodded in turn and left, closing the door behind him and going to his room to change. He had wet dog hair all over these clothes, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Playlist for this fic: https://open.spotify.com/playlist/2isAqourcy2jHlsCSSyCo5?si=067d0247109c49dc

It's subject to change depending on my desires, and I understand a few song choices are likely to earn a laugh from you. If any of you ever have a suggestion for a song or two to add, I'd love to know <3

18

Will listened as Hannibal walked down the hall to his own room, then moved to the bed, where he had set the clothes. Will buried his nose in the soft fabric, inhaling deeply. He filled his lungs and senses with Hannibal, feeling calmed by the scents and textures.

This was getting to be a problem.

Calmer now, Will thought he could make the change.

He knew sometimes extreme stress or anxiety could hinder a wolf's ability to shift, but he had never had a problem before. He had freaked out a bit when he had woken up this way again, and had run all the way to Hannibal's door when he couldn't shift back. He hadn't known what to do. He had never struggled to shift, regardless of his anxiety levels. He had never shifted without meaning to, until the day before at Hannibal's. This was all new, and frightening.

Now, with his lungs and senses full of Hannibal, he felt so much more calm. Hannibal was safe, and he was going to help.

Will focused, and shifted back.

It worked. He was human again.

Will ran his tongue over his teeth, and was only half surprised to find they were not his usual human teeth. They were more canine than normal. Somewhere between the forms.

It made some kind of sense. His forms had been somehow getting closer, making the shifts happen in his sleep and making his senses heightened. It made sense the change was having a physical effect on this form as well.

Will dressed in Hannibal's clothes, pulling the fabric over his nose and breathing in deeply. He knew it wasn't normal to act this way, but he didn't seem to have much of an impulse control due to this illness.

A neurologist.

Will went down to the kitchen to wait for Hannibal to come down.

Did he need a neurologist? Was it really encephalitis? Would this doctor be able to help?

If Hannibal trusted him, Will was sure he knew what he was doing, or could find someone who did. Will decided to see it through. He needed to get this all figured out. He had to find out what was wrong with him.

Will paced the kitchen floor, breathing deeply and taking in all the scents of the food Hannibal had cooked recently and had stored in the room. It was comforting, the smells of

care.

Will heard Hannibal when he was on the stairs, and turned to the doorway to face him when he entered. He was nervous about the upcoming conversation.

Hannibal stopped in the entrance to the kitchen, looking Will over. Will heard a slight change in his breathing, but ignored it for the moment. He had more important things to deal with.

“I’m pleased you managed the shift,” Hannibal said, smiling warmly, “conversation is fairly difficult when you are in that form.”

Will blushed slightly and nodded.

“I’m so sorry. For everything. Yesterday. I was so rude to you. I don’t know why I did all that. I didn’t even think. And then I lost time, and I know I should have told you, but I was scared. And now I just showed up and made a mess and caused you trouble. I’m sorry.”

Hannibal only smiled, shaking his head and walking up to Will.

“You have no need to apologize, Will,” he said softly, placing his hands on Will’s arms, “I knew you were feeling unwell, and was not at all upset by your behavior. My only regret is that I felt powerless to help you yesterday. That you have come to me when you need help, I am more than mollified. I am glad to be here when you need me.”

Will ducked his head, unsure how to respond to that. He felt his tail give a wag and cursed his nature. He plucked at the hem of his borrowed clothes and chewed his lower lip with his now much sharper teeth.

“Thank you for all your help,” Will whispered, too nervous to speak any louder, “I really don’t deserve this.”

Hannibal sighed.

“This is not about what you deserve,” he said firmly, “it is about what I wish to give. I will decide where the line is drawn. Do you require anything else before we leave?”

Will shook his head, shifting his weight on his bare feet. He really didn’t have anything of his own with him. If anyone thought to check his apartment for him, they might think something had happened. But the only person who would worry if he ever disappeared was standing right there with him.

“I’m fine,” he said, and Hannibal nodded.

“Then let’s be on our way. Would you like to stop by your apartment before we meet my colleague?”

Will nodded.

“Yeah. Not that I don’t appreciate these,” he said, pulling at the shirt again, “but it might not be the best look if I show up in nothing but your clothes.”

Hannibal seemed to have a profound thought at that, but didn't share it. He just agreed and they headed out.

Will wanted to get some different clothes, but he was loathe to change out of the ones that smelled of Hannibal.

Will Graham would be the death of Hannibal. He was certain of it.

Hannibal had nearly broken when he had entered the kitchen and seen Will. The pajamas were too big, and hung off of Will in a way that made him seem smaller. His ears, and flush, and his wagging tail had made Hannibal pause to catch his breath.

He was adorable.

Hannibal had wanted to object to Will changing out of them for the appointment. He liked the way Will looked, and *wanted* Sutcliff to make assumptions. He wanted everyone to assume Will belonged to Hannibal in that way. He wanted them to be *right* .

But he knew Will would be more comfortable without that kind of scrutiny.

Hannibal waited in the car as Will prepared himself for the appointment, and made arrangements for them both to be absent from the office that morning. They had been gone increasingly often recently, due to Jack for the most part. It was a nuisance, but Hannibal had enjoyed seeing Will react to and analyze the crimes.

Will emerged, a backpack held protectively against his chest. His hair had been combed, and he was wearing a button down shirt and slacks. Hannibal smiled, imagining Will had decided to make a good impression, regardless of the circumstances. If so, Hannibal thought it would more likely be for Hannibal's sake than Will's own. Will was peculiar that way.

"Okay," Will said, sliding into the car and keeping the bag on his lap, held against his chest, "let's go find out what's wrong with me."

Hannibal nodded, and they were on their way.

Hannibal wondered what was in the bag Will held so jealously. It seemed to be a self-comforting action more than out of any real need to protect the contents, but he must have something personally significant in it.

The drive was not too long, but enough that silence would have felt unnatural.

"You mentioned losing time yesterday," Hannibal said, hoping Will wouldn't get upset about him asking, "was this after you left my home?"

Will's eyes widened.

"Yes. I remember everything I did at your house. Don't worry about that. It was just my way home. It must have only been a few minutes. Half an hour?"

Hannibal dropped his jaw in a paradigm of shock and glanced at Will with surprise. He had guessed Will had walked all the way to the office, where his car had been waiting, and could have guessed Will would have been more frightened if he had lost time while driving. It made sense that he had only lost time while walking. He wanted to allow Will to believe he was telling him without any assumption on Hannibal's part beforehand.

Will winced at the expression Hannibal gave him, his grip on the bag tightening slightly as his ears fell a bit.

"I know. I'm sorry. I was just so frightened. I didn't know what to do, and I wasn't thinking clearly. These headaches make it harder to act logically. My thoughts get all wooly."

Will raised a hand to massage his temple, likely having a headache in that moment.

Hannibal was amused by Will's colorful description. Wooly thoughts indeed. He could imagine Will's skull, a scattering of ideas cast around and caught in a thicket of wool that had gathered in the bowl.

Hannibal wondered what Will would think of such an image.

"Not to worry, Will," Hannibal said gently, coloring his words with concern to keep Will from noticing his straying thoughts, "we will soon have a solution. I expect the headaches are a result of the encephalitis. Once you are properly treated, they should cease."

Will nodded, though he seemed distracted.

There was a long stretch of silence, as Hannibal allowed Will to gather his thoughts and decide if he was going to bring up what seemed to be bothering him.

"What if you're wrong?" Will asked, his voice nearly a whisper that Hannibal had to strain to hear. Hannibal glanced at him with a frown, and Will took it as a bid to elaborate. "What if it's not physical? What if there's something psychological wrong with me?"

Hannibal paused a moment for consideration.

"If that is the case, who is more adept to help you than I?" he asked, and Will smiled.

"Humility isn't your strong point, is it Doctor?" Will teased, then winced at another jab of pain in his skull, "Ugh. But don't worry. I knew that when I applied for the job. I would have been disappointed to show up and find you didn't have some pride in your abilities."

Hannibal smiled. He had guessed Will would respond in that way. Will had never shown any resentment towards Hannibal when he refused to back down from a compliment to his own skill and accomplishments. Will really had known who he had signed up to work for, and Hannibal saw no reason to provide him with anything other than that.

"Whatever the case, I will help you," Hannibal said, "as your friend."

Will blinked in surprise, but nodded. He turned to look back out the window, and Hannibal was satisfied.

19

A nurse handed Will a paper gown to change into, smiling brightly as if she was *pleased as punch* to be there doing her job. The expression grated a bit on Hannibal, possibly only because it was in such stark contrast to what Will seemed to be feeling.

Will's ears were against his skull, and his tail was wrapped nervously around his leg. His backpack was still clutched tightly to his chest, continuing to intrigue Hannibal.

Will let out a soft whine, pitiful in his vulnerability.

Hannibal put a hand on Will's shoulder for comfort, and Will looked up at him with wide eyes.

"You will be alright, Will," Hannibal said gently, smiling reassuringly, "I am confident."

Will took in a deep breath, leaning towards Hannibal a bit and then nodding.

"Okay. I trust you."

Hannibal went to be with Sutcliff when the images loaded. He was anxious to have Will diagnosed and on his way to recovery.

When Hannibal's phone rang, he knew who it would be immediately and he frowned. Jack must have called the office phone a few times, and hadn't reached Will. Will had turned his phone off in the car, mumbling about not wanting to say something embarrassing to a patient, but Hannibal had thought it more likely he wanted to avoid talking to Agent Crawford.

"Hello, Jack," Hannibal said politely, though not pleasantly, "what can I do for you?"

Jack wasn't happy, but Hannibal hadn't expected him to be. He thought Jack wasn't likely to be happy until this killer he was chasing was behind bars. Even then, he would just move on to the next one, and be dissatisfied again.

"You can get in touch with Will Graham," Jack said, "I haven't been able to reach him through his number or the number for your office."

Hannibal hummed in agreement. Just as he had guessed.

"Will is currently unavailable. May I take a message?"

Sutcliff raised a curious eyebrow, apparently having expected anyone who called Hannibal to be looking for him instead of anyone else. Not an unreasonable expectation, all things considered. Especially for someone who knew nothing about what Will Graham was capable of doing for the FBI.

Jack huffed.

“I want to send an officer to the workplaces of the victims, and the places they frequent. He said he should go too. When will he be available again?”

Hannibal did some quick math, watching through the observation window as Will cautiously walked into the MRI room and laid on the table. Sutcliff gave Will a few instructions through the intercom, and Will was clearly tense and anxious. Hannibal guessed Will would be hospitalized, if only so Sutcliff could observe him. He wouldn’t be available for a week at least.

“Not for a few hours yet, as far as I can tell,” Hannibal answered, “and that may be optimistic. I very much doubt he will be in any condition to help you today. I would recommend you either reschedule or proceed without him.”

Jack grumbled softly, and Hannibal imagined he was pinching the bridge of his nose. They both knew very well the plan wouldn’t work without Will.

“Is he sick? He looked a little pale last I saw him.”

Hannibal was impressed Jack had noticed. He hadn’t thought Jack cared enough. As it was, he hadn’t expressed any concern, and didn’t sound all that worried for Will’s health now. He was just impatient to catch a killer.

“I believe that is not my place to say,” Hannibal replied, “and I am very busy at the moment. I will speak with you again soon.”

Jack tried to object, but Hannibal ended the call. He was not concerned with being polite to Crawford. Will was his only concern at the moment.

“There it is,” Sutcliff said, gesturing at the image of Will’s brain that appeared on the screen, “that’s definitely encephalitis. I’m no Manifest expert, but I know an inflamed brain when I see one. It looks pretty advanced, too. How long has he had the symptoms?”

Hannibal frowned.

“I cannot be sure,” he admitted, “the most serious of them became obvious in just the past few days, after Will experienced a traumatic event. I cannot be sure whether he was experiencing others before then.”

Sutcliff hummed appreciatively.

“Well, it could be due to wolves having a higher metabolism,” he said thoughtfully, “the illness seems to have progressed incredibly quickly. I would have expected him to be having serious symptoms for at least two weeks before now, just looking at these scans.”

Hannibal nodded. If that was the case, he was glad he had brought Will in so soon. If the illness was progressing so rapidly, it would not be safe to continue the experiment much longer. Will could be irreparably damaged.

“I don’t suppose you’d allow me to take some samples,” Sutcliff said, casting a glance at Hannibal to watch his reaction to the suggestion.

Hannibal didn't outwardly show it, but he was disgusted. Sutcliff should have asked Will that, especially because it was such an invasive thing he was suggesting. Instead, he had looked to Hannibal as if he owned the dear boy, and had full authority over his mind and body.

Hannibal wouldn't say the prospect had no allure to him, but he wouldn't have Will be insulted in that way. It was presumptuous of Sutcliff, and rude.

"You would have to ask Will," Hannibal said lightly, not showing his smoldering rage, "I think it unlikely he would be open to the idea, but there is certainly no harm in asking."

Sutcliff didn't seem to realize how near he was to a knife edge. He just shrugged nonchalantly and continued looking at the scans.

Will clutched his backpack nervously as the theatrically glad nurse led him to the room where the doctor would show him the results of the scan. He took in a deep breath, calming himself with the scents coming from the bag's contents.

Will guessed Hannibal had really pulled some strings to make this all possible. As far as he was aware, most patients weren't allowed into this room regularly.

Will owed Hannibal big.

Doctor Sutcliff smiled politely when he saw Will in the doorway. The expression was odd and slightly off, like he expected something more from Will. Something that would benefit him.

Hannibal's presence was calming, and Will took in another deep breath, this time filling his lungs with the scent of Hannibal as much as he could. Hannibal's smile did have warmth, and it was a comfort to Will. It meant they had found the problem, and it wasn't any worse than what Hannibal had expected.

"There you are," Sutcliff said, waving Will closer, "come see this, Will."

Will winced a bit, not liking the way his name sounded on the man's tongue, but he moved forward to peer at the screen where Sutcliff was staring.

"It's amazing," Sutcliff said, "from what Hannibal could tell me, you haven't been sick for all that long, but this is a highly advanced stage of encephalitis. Much longer and you wouldn't hardly know who you are. It's fascinating."

Will felt his chest tighten at the man's words, and his breathing started coming short. His grip on the backpack tightened, crushing it into his chest to the point where his arms ached from the tension. He could hear his pulse in his ears.

Hannibal's hand landed on Will's shoulder, and he instantly felt better. He closed his eyes and focused on slowing his breathing.

“What Donald is saying is we know what it is. You can begin treatment, and be well again soon.”

Will felt his shoulders sag with relief.

Sutcliff nodded, his excitement not dampened at all by Will’s near panic.

“Oh, of course,” he said, “but Will, I’d like to ask something of you. It wouldn’t be an inconvenience to you at all, I promise, and everything can be completely anonymous.”

Will frowned, and he could feel Hannibal frowning as well. Whatever this was, Hannibal didn’t think Sutcliff was doing it right, or should be doing it at all. Will didn’t know which, but it did make him more wary.

“You know the medical field is woefully short on resources for studying the anatomy and metabolism of Manifest Wolves,” Sutcliff continued, oblivious, “so I just want to take a few samples. Blood and hair mostly, nothing too invasive. Just for the sake of being able to better understand how you work and how we can help better in the future. You understand.”

The assumptions that Will not only knew these things about the medical field, but also would agree that this was reasonable of the doctor to ask of him, rubbed Will the wrong way. He fought the urge to snarl at the man, knowing the man meant no harm and doing so would be seen as aggressive no matter how deserved it was.

“I don’t really want to be a test subject,” Will said through clenched teeth, flexing his grip on the backpack and noticing the fact that his claws were trying to come out.

Sutcliff shook his head.

“I won’t be doing tests on you,” he said, “just taking a few samples. You can still be treated right away. And your name won’t be associated with any studies that are written up as a result.”

Will bit his tongue, blood spilling in his mouth from his sharp teeth cutting through the flesh immediately. His head hurt, and he didn’t want to be here anymore. He just wanted to get some medicine and go home. He wanted to get back to work, doing everything he could to help Doctor Lecter and being seen as harmless.

A low growl escaped Will against his wishes, and Hannibal’s hand was quickly on his shoulder again. Sutcliff stared at them both, less frightened and more intrigued. He didn’t seem to realize he could potentially be in danger. He was just curious.

“No,” Will said, drawing from Hannibal’s calming presence, “I refuse. You may not take any samples, or include any of my tests or results in any studies or papers. Absolutely not.”

Sutcliff seemed surprised, then, as if he had thought he’d made a really good pitch for the idea. He had expected Will to see things the way he did.

Will could have. He could have looked out through the eyes of this doctor and understood his desire to learn about this. But he didn’t want to.

“Oh. Alright,” Sutcliff said, and they finally moved on to treatments.

20

Hannibal was mentally choosing recipes to add Sutcliff's clumsy tongue and lungs to as they admitted Will to the hospital. Hannibal would have insisted he was entirely capable of taking care of Will himself, no admittance necessary, but he had felt Will wouldn't be open to the offer. Will seemed to feel as if he owed Hannibal something after all this.

Hannibal would have to wait until Will was released and long since healed before he could kill the doctor, but that was alright. It gave them time to catch this current killer, so Will would not be imposed upon during his convalescence. Then, Will could turn his attention to Hannibal in full.

"Are there things you would like me to gather from your apartment?" Hannibal offered gently, watching as Will restlessly shifted in the hospital bed.

Will didn't seem very excited about the idea of being stuck here with tubes in his arms. Hannibal was glad he was willing to do it regardless, because he really did need to be treated.

Will sighed.

"I feel like such a burden," he said, closing his eyes and leaning back against the stiff pillows, "but yes. I hadn't expected to be admitted."

Hannibal nodded. He hadn't warned Will, afraid it would discourage him from actually going to the hospital.

Will held out his backpack, offering it to Hannibal. Hannibal accepted it curiously, holding it gingerly.

"That's got those clothes I borrowed from you in it," Will told him, not opening his eyes, "You can take them out and put my things in the bag. I shouldn't need much."

Hannibal opened the bag to see that his pajamas were indeed folded gently inside the bag. There was very little else in there, only Will's phone, keys, and wallet, and Hannibal felt a rush of warmth through his chest.

Will had been finding comfort from Hannibal's scent this entire time. He had brought the clothes with him because they smelled of Hannibal, and reminded him of Hannibal. Hannibal brought Will comfort.

Hannibal schooled his expression and asked what Will would need. Will gave him a short list, and Hannibal was on his way.

Hannibal was excited for this chance to see the place where Will lived. He understood Will's discomfort in having Hannibal enter his home, as it was his one place of solitary safety, but he was still curious to see how Will kept his personal space.

Upon opening the door of Will's apartment, Hannibal was met with an interesting sight.

The apartment was small, one living space and a kitchen, then a hall with a bathroom and one bedroom, but Will's bed was in the living space. Hannibal was curious about this choice, stepping in and closing the door behind him. Will's bed was unmade, but the rest of the room was in order. Hannibal guessed Will would usually make his bed in the morning, but the nature of his waking this morning had left him unable to do so. It made sense that Will kept his living space relatively neat, as Hannibal had seen a dedication to order in his work that showed a habitual neatness to a degree.

Hannibal slowly went around the apartment, careful not to touch very much as he knew his scent would linger. He didn't want Will to know he was snooping a bit.

The bedroom, which was not being used as such, had been turned into something of a workshop. There were two desks, one covered in fishing flies and the other with an assortment of tools set around an empty space. The room smelled of engine grease, and Hannibal looked around curiously. There were tools and materials on the fishing lure desk, convincing Hannibal Will must make his own. Whatever he tinkered with at the other desk, Hannibal was impressed with Will's pragmatism. Will hadn't talked much about his hobbies, though he had mentioned liking to fish once or twice before.

This was a very interesting peek into Will's life. Hannibal was thoroughly enjoying himself.

Hannibal's phone rang, and he frowned when he saw it was Donald Sutcliff.

"Hello."

"Hannibal. I'm sorry to bother you, but Will is having a problem."

Hannibal felt his heart drop, and he decided Sutcliff would die far sooner than he had been planning if he was in any way responsible for this.

"What happened?"

"Well, we aren't entirely sure," Sutcliff answered, sounding frustrated and frayed, "when it was time for him to get the IV, he had shifted into his domestic form. He either refuses to shift back or is unable to, and he is not allowing any of the staff to approach him. What would you suggest we do?"

Hannibal considered it for only a moment before he knew what would be needed.

"Wait for my return," he said, "try to avoid making any loud or startling noises near his room, or do anything that will further agitate him. I believe I will be able to help him."

Sutcliff sighed in relief. Hannibal guessed that was the answer he had been hoping for, and hadn't wanted to have to ask for Hannibal to come back explicitly.

"Thank you, Hannibal."

Hannibal ended the call and gathered the things Will had requested. He made his way back to the hospital quickly, feeling only mildly smug at the thought that Will would not let the others near him until Hannibal was with him. As long as that proved to be true, Hannibal would be very pleased with today altogether.

There was a small gathering of nurses and doctors standing outside Will's door when Hannibal approached, to which he sighed. They had no idea what they were dealing with. Will would be able to hear every movement they made, and smell them. They would be making him more nervous by standing there, no matter how quiet or unobtrusive they thought they were being.

"Excuse me," Hannibal said politely, hoping they would at least be mindful enough to make way for him to enter the room.

One of the nurses turned to him with wide eyes, shaking his head.

"You don't want to go in there," he said, "a wolf's shifted, and he's snapped at a few of us."

Hannibal smiled, though he wanted to scoff.

"I am aware. He is my friend, and I believe I may be able to help you. If you would all kindly step away from the doorway, I'm sure he can hear and smell you plenty. Your gathered presence is likely only agitating him more."

The nurse's jaw dropped and he stepped out of the way. So did the rest of the crowd, letting Hannibal go to the door and step inside the room without contest.

Will was curled up in the corner of the room, whimpering softly. He chuffed several times, likely trying to clear his nose of the scents of the hospital, which were unpleasant even to humans without a heightened sense of smell.

Hannibal set the bag on a chair softly, stepping closer to Will with his hands outstretched to him. There was a paper gown waiting on the chair nearest Will, which Hannibal was grateful for.

"Will," Hannibal said gently, and Will raised his head to look at him. Hannibal smiled and knelt down near the large canine form. "Come, Will."

Will might have otherwise been insulted to be commanded like a pet dog, but Hannibal thought he saw some relief in Will's eyes when he said it now. Will lifted himself off the floor and moved up to Hannibal, sniffing deeply.

Hannibal raised his hands and sank them into Will's thick, soft fur. He rubbed at the fur around Will's scruff and his ears, pulling Will closer to him as he did so. Will's tail thumped a few times and he pressed his nose close to Hannibal's chest as Hannibal smiled. Hannibal rubbed at Will's ears and petted over his face and neck. Will's mouth dropped open in a wide canine grin, and his tail thumped happily.

“Alright, Will,” Hannibal said softly, “I need you to shift back. They need to begin your medication, and they cannot if you are in this form. I rather think you may have frightened them.”

The door behind Hannibal creaked a bit, and Will let out a low growl. Hannibal turned and fixed the nurse trying to enter with a stern look of reproach. The girl jumped slightly and quickly retreated, leaving Hannibal to get back to what he had been doing.

“I know, Will,” Hannibal said gently, “you don’t like it here. I understand, and I would like nothing more than to take you away from this place. After you begin to improve, and you are allowed to leave, I would like to take you somewhere. Perhaps a lake, where the sunlight reflects off the water and shimmers across your lovely hair. You can fish, and I could sketch you.”

Will closed his eyes and let out a low whine, pressing his head against Hannibal’s chest.

“I will close my eyes if that makes you more comfortable,” Hannibal said, and closed his eyes to give Will the privacy necessary for the shift.

After a long moment, Hannibal felt Will’s form change under his hands, so his fingers were twined in soft curls rather than thick fur. Will pulled away to don the gown, and Hannibal smiled to himself.

21

Will was ashamed of himself. He hadn't been in his right mind when he had shifted. He had been confused and unable to think rationally.

But he remembered all of it.

He had been so pathetic and weak. He hated that. He hated being weak, or seeming to be. He didn't want to be pitied, any more than he wanted to be feared. He just wanted to be respected and treated like a person.

None of the nursing staff seemed capable of that now.

Will could see the hesitance and fear in their eyes as they came in and inserted the IV. He saw the way their eyes flicked to Hannibal, as if he was the man with the leash to the wild animal. He saw the way they looked at him, as if he had lost his mind and was no longer human. They didn't understand anything, and he hated it.

After a flurry of activity directly following his shift back to human form, there was a lull where he and Hannibal were once again alone in the room.

Will remembered everything Hannibal had said, too. Hannibal had spoken of taking Will away, somewhere he could fish. Hannibal had said he would like to sketch Will. Hannibal had said it all with such sincere and genuine wistful desire, Will now found it difficult to even look at the man. He didn't understand his own emotions roiling away in his chest.

"How are you feeling, Will?" Hannibal asked, and Will scoffed.

"Like one hell of an idiot," he said, "I feel like I'm losing my mind, and I can't be trusted to be left alone at all. That's just peachy. I'm lucky they didn't decide to muzzle me for the safety of the staff. They would probably be well within their rights to do it."

Hannibal frowned. Will saw it in his periphery, his eyes fixed on his own hands curled in his lap.

"You should improve quickly," Hannibal said, "and I would absolutely never allow them to do such a thing to you. You have not harmed anyone."

Will huffed a bitter laugh.

"Not yet. You came to the rescue, just like you always do. Like I'm your misbehaving *pet* ."

Will spat the last word, hating the way it tasted in his mouth. He refused to be *kept* . He belonged only to himself. He had worked his entire life for that to be true, and he wouldn't let this take that away from him. He had taken steps back in the past week or so, being too ill to think properly, and he would have to regain that ground. He would have to work again to

show everyone he was not a pet. He was not some dog on a leash. No matter what hand held the leash, Will refused to be on the other end.

“I did not intend for you to feel that way,” Hannibal said softly, sounding genuinely regretful, as if it was his fault, “I would never wish for you to feel I am imposing my own will on you.”

Will grimaced, more at himself than Hannibal.

“It’s not your fault,” he said, rubbing a hand over his face, “it’s not really mine either. It’s this stupid illness. Whatever’s wrong with me has been making it harder for me to hold on to myself. You kept me together, which I’m grateful for. It just means you now look like my keeper.”

Hannibal was silent for a long time. Will hoped he wasn’t insulting the man, because that would be just great after everything Hannibal had done for him. Bite the hand that feeds, and all that. He would probably be lucky to have a job when he got out of the hospital.

Actually, he knew Hannibal wasn’t about to fire him. Hannibal was too good for that. He was too kind.

“Has Jack called?” Will asked, not knowing what else to say at this point.

Hannibal sighed softly and nodded.

“Yes. He is anxious to have you at his beck and call, at least to whatever degree he will. I informed him you are not currently available. Depending on your recovery time, he may or may not have to follow his plan without you. I told him he must discuss it with you.”

Will huffed out a long breath. He felt like hell warmed over, but he knew the plan wouldn’t work without him. He was the key, unless Jack had another Manifest at his disposal, which Will doubted.

“Doctor Sutcliff said I have a fast metabolism, which might be why the illness progressed so quickly. That or a better immune system,” he said slowly, “does that mean I might recover quickly as well? Because I’ll be getting the medicine through my system faster?”

Will watched as Hannibal considered it. He wasn’t too hopeful, and he didn’t know much about medicine, but he wanted to be helpful as soon as possible.

“It is possible,” Hannibal said, sounding none too pleased by it, “but I would recommend you get as much rest as possible, even once you are released. Your usual duties in the office would likely not be too much, but anything additional, such as working with Jack Crawford, I would highly discourage.”

Will closed his eyes and leaned back on the pillows. He had expected that kind of response from Hannibal. He knew Hannibal didn’t want him to hurt himself, or make the illness any worse. He knew Hannibal wanted what was best for him.

And he was going to be a disappointment.

Will was going to let the topic drop for the day, but he had every intention of helping Jack catch the killer the moment he was out of this hospital.

“We’ll have to see how fast I’m out of here, first and foremost,” Will said.

Hannibal agreed, and seemed satisfied to let the conversation end for the time being. They talked about mundane things for a while, Hannibal helping to distract Will from all the sights and sounds of the hospital. His senses were still too strong, and everything put him on edge.

All too soon, Hannibal had to leave. He had business to attend to, which they had been leaving woefully untended due to recent circumstances. Will understood. That didn’t make him any less anxious to be left here without him.

“I’ll try not to get kicked out for bad behavior,” Will said wryly, and Hannibal smiled.

“I would formally complain against any staff that attempt it,” he said, “but I believe you will be fine. I’ll return with something for you to eat for dinner.”

Will smiled and closed his eyes, feeling tired from the illness, stress, and medication.

“You don’t think the food here is good enough for me?” he asked.

Hannibal let out a soft huff, and Will’s smile widened.

“I did not claim any such thing,” Hannibal said, “though, in my experience, hospital food is somewhat lacking.”

Will laughed and shook his head.

Hannibal probably had control issues, wanting to have complete authority over every aspect of his life. Will had seen evidence of it before, and now he thought it was all the more clear. The man wanted to control his own life, and he was struggling with his inability to control what was happening to Will.

He was trying to compensate by controlling what Will ate.

“Alright,” Will said, moving to lay down more comfortably, “as long as it’s Doctor’s orders.”

Hannibal smiled.

“It’s the offer of a friend,” he corrected gently.

Hannibal set out the food on the little table Will had for eating in the hospital bed. Will considered what Hannibal’s reactions meant, and tried to make sense of it all.

“It bothers you when I use your title,” Will realized aloud, “you’re always unhappy when I call you Doctor.”

Hannibal sighed softly and set the table across Will's legs.

"I suppose I should not be bothered by it," Hannibal said, "but I find it impersonal, and I worry you are putting me at a distance."

Will considered that, watching as Hannibal continued to fuss over the soup. Will wondered why Hannibal was bothering with this all. He thought it felt like more than just a friend would do, but he had very little frame of reference for it. He was not used to having friends.

Will's thoughts were still blurry and wooly, making it hard for him to put the pieces together. He put the idea aside for later, banking of the treatments and medications making him better and more able to think. Hannibal said it would.

"Alright," Will said with a nod, "I'll stop doing it unless we're around Jack or a patient. I still have an image to reinforce."

Hannibal smiled a bit and Will took his first spoonful of the soup.

"Thank you. It's delicious," Will said, "Hannibal."

Hannibal's smile brightened and he pulled out some bread for Will as well.

"You are very welcome, Will," he said, setting a slice of the bread onto a plate and sliding it onto the table, "I am more than pleased to help in any way I can."

Will looked up at Hannibal and noticed he had set his jaw against something else he had almost said. He would not meet Will's eye, and his lips had turned back down into a frown.

Hannibal was upset about something.

"What's wrong?" Will asked, "there's something on your mind, and it's not what I call you."

Hannibal sighed again, very softly. His eyes fixed on the bowl of soup, and he watched as Will ate a few more spoonfuls.

"I am filled with regret for your current situation," he admitted, "I feel as if I could have recognized your need for medical attention sooner, and helped you."

Will chewed a bit of the bread, something homemade and delicious. He wondered when Hannibal found the time to make stuff like bread.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but I recall being averse to accepting help," Will said, "I was stubborn, and refused to take care of myself. I insisted on continuing to work. You did try."

Hannibal didn't seem at all convinced. He didn't try to argue any further, but Will could tell he wanted to. All Hannibal did was watch Will eat with a mildly sad expression.

The soup really was good, and Will was glad he wasn't having to eat the hospital food. He hadn't confessed as much to Hannibal, but Will had been dreading the moment a mealtime

came around and a nurse would bring him a tray of food. He had smelled some of the food on a few of the nurses, and had not been thrilled by the scents.

If only every patient in this place had someone like Hannibal to rescue them.

“What’s the plan?” Will asked, and Hannibal finally met his eyes, “I mean, I guess I’m stuck here until they say I’m well enough to leave, but after that?”

Hannibal considered it for a moment, studying Will.

“That is entirely up to you,” he said carefully.

Will tipped his head.

“Hannibal, I’m not an idiot,” he admonished, and Hannibal visibly winced, “you haven’t wanted me helping Jack in the way I suggested, and now I can’t. When I get out of here, Jack is going to want me on the case again. I need to know if you’re going to support me in that.”

Hannibal was silent for a long moment. Will didn’t know what to expect, and he worried about upsetting Hannibal again. Hannibal had been doing so many things for Will, and helping him with everything. He had been understanding and kind and supportive, and Will was pushing it with this request.

But Will had already decided his own course of action, and wanted to know if it was going to be against Hannibal’s express wishes or not.

“I am not your handler, Will,” Hannibal said calmly, “You are not mine to control. I do not agree with Jack’s decision to use you as bait, nor your suggestion for him to do so. However, I understand your desire to be helpful and catch this killer.”

Hannibal paused, and Will nearly held his breath as he waited for him to continue.

“I will support you,” Hannibal said at last, “and offer my aid in whatever capacity it is needed. I would not abandon you in this.”

Will sighed with relief, and his tail thumped against the bed. It made Hannibal smile a bit, and Will returned the expression.

“Thank you, Hannibal,” Will said, and he was sure he had never meant anything more.

22

Hannibal was anxious for the case to be closed. He didn't want Will put in danger, but he knew there was little choice at this point. Jack had his mind set, and only one course of action would satisfy him.

According to Doctor Sutcliff, Will was improving rapidly. Will had wondered about that, and Hannibal had been curious as well. It seemed both illness and cures worked faster on Manifest wolves. They did not know exactly how much faster, and Sutcliff was constantly irritated by Will's refusal to become a test subject. Hannibal thought it very likely Sutcliff had been discussing Will's condition and recovery with other doctors, regardless of Will's wishes. He had been much too excited by the research possibilities.

Hannibal was irked by that, but there was little he could do about it at that point. Will seemed to have put some distance between them during his stay at the hospital, and Hannibal was occupied with trying to figure out how to fix that on top of how to deal with the case and then with Jack Crawford once the case had been wrapped up. Hannibal had too many things on his mind to focus on a bottom feeder like Sutcliff.

Hannibal entered Will's hospital room with his bag for their breakfast, and found Will deeply asleep. His ears were relaxed down on his head, but one twitched at the slight click of the door as Hannibal entered.

Hannibal smiled and closed the door gently, careful not to wake Will as he crossed the room and sat in the chair by the bedside. Will's head had been facing away from the chair, but when Hannibal sat he turned toward him and took a deep breath in. Hannibal's smile grew, and he reached out towards the bed.

Will made a soft sound in his sleep, shifting closer to Hannibal's hand and breathing deeply. Hannibal set his hand into Will's hair between his ears, letting it sit there for a moment in case the sensation woke Will. Will only sighed softly in his sleep and pressed up into Hannibal's touch, urging Hannibal to continue. Hannibal began to gently rub his fingers into Will's scalp, watching with rapt attention as Will reacted to his touch.

Hannibal moved to rub gently at the velvety surface of his ears, having been curious about this for some time.

Will's face slackened, and he seemed younger. He looked so comfortable and happy. He relaxed into Hannibal's touch, his breathing coming more even and steady. Will's nose twitched, and his lips pulled into a soft, unconscious smile.

The door opened, and Hannibal quickly pulled his hand back. Will let out a soft whine at the loss, but Hannibal wouldn't return to that if anyone would see.

Donald Sutcliff entered and grinned when he saw Hannibal there.

"Hannibal! Just the man I wanted to see," he said cheerily.

Hannibal smiled in return, but felt no more desire to entertain this man. Any entertainment value Sutcliff had once held had been lost during this treatment for Will.

“When entering Will’s room, you were hoping to see someone other than he,” Hannibal mused, not allowing himself to sound sour, “how peculiar, when you could have called me.”

Sutcliff cast a bewildered glance at Hannibal, but apparently found no reason for concern in his features.

“I was just hoping you could help me out,” Sutcliff said, walking over to lean against Will’s bed. The action made Hannibal want to cut his throat, but he restrained himself. “Actually, we could help each other.”

Hannibal made no answer.

“I’ve been doing some research into manifest wolf consent laws regarding medical testing,” Sutcliff began, and Hannibal was awed by the sheer stubborn audacity of the man, “and they’re a bit vague in these kind of circumstances. You are actually in a position where you could claim a level of ownership over him, and give your consent to the tests.”

Hannibal frowned.

“Will has already made his decision,” he said calmly, “and he does not belong to anyone, much less me.”

Sutcliff waved that away.

“Of course not,” he said, “you don’t own him, but you are the only earthly connection he has, and you are his employer. Not to mention, you’re a psychiatrist. Your position is uniquely suited to this. You can declare him unfit to make this decision, and make it for him.”

Hannibal was very near to killing the man. It was for Will’s sake he held back.

Will was frightened.

There were so many people, and they were all chasing him, trying to put him into a muzzle and collar. They were loud, and too bright, and frightening. They hurt his eyes and his ears, and they smelled like danger. Like chemicals and death.

Will ran from them. He ran on two legs, on four, on two again. No matter how he ran or how fast he pumped his legs, they were always just behind. He felt them reaching, their fingers brushing his tail and trying to grasp it.

When Will was too tired, when his lungs were burning and his muscles felt like lead on his bones, he was caught.

Their hands gripped him and pushed him down. Their hands were all over him as he struggled, trying to get away from their touch. His skin crawled with revulsion and fear, and

their hands were on him, holding him down.

First, the collar. It clicked on, a secure lock that someone held the key to. Will knew this, even though he couldn't see the mechanism. It had sounded like a lock, and of course it would be. The thick leather chafed against his skin, burning him as he writhed. He screamed, trying to get away. He growled and snarled and bit where he could, but they were always just out of reach, unperturbed by his threats.

The muzzle was shoved onto his face, forcing his jaw shut and yanking his head up to expose his throat. There was another click as the muzzle was locked, and Will felt tears slide down his face.

The voices turned mocking, telling him how he deserved this and how *dangerous animals needed to be tamed* . He was pulled to his feet and pushed around, turned and shoved until he was disoriented.

This dream was a familiar one to Will. He had been having this dream since he was thirteen, and it was always the same. The faces on the mob changed over the years, from classmates to coworkers and friends. Always people he trusted or liked.

There was a yank on the leash attached to his collar, and he was pulled away from the crowd. He stumbled and fell to his knees, one hand reaching up to pull uselessly at the leather around his neck and face.

Someone knelt in front of him, the leash in their hand. Will looked up and met their eyes, his chest flooding with relief when he saw who it was.

Hannibal looked at him with his warm burgundy eyes, and Will knew he was safe.

Hannibal pulled on the leash again, dragging Will forward. His hand slid along the leash until it rested at the place where it met the collar, and he held it firmly. Hannibal tipped Will's face up towards him, the pull of the collar pressing into Will's skin painfully.

Hannibal smirked, the expression so unkind Will was stunned to see it on his face.

"Now," Hannibal said, looming over Will, "be a good boy."

Will stirred slowly, roused by the sound of a conversation in the room where he was.

One of the voices was soft and smooth and deep, Will recognized it as Hannibal's. The other made him want to go back to sleep, his unpleasant voice only made worse by his tone of upset.

It was Doctor Sutcliff.

"I believe I already gave you my answer," Hannibal said, and he sounded eerily calm. Like an ocean before a storm.

“That was before,” Sutcliff said, “now you know this, and it changes things. Think of what this could mean for medical studies. I just want a few tests, and you can give me that. You want to know too, don’t deny it. You’re curious to see what kind of effects illness has on a manifest.”

Hannibal was quiet for a moment. Will felt his heart sink as he realized they were talking about him. Sutcliff was trying to get Hannibal to let him do tests on Will. Apparently, Hannibal had that authority for some reason.

Those stupid Manifest wolf consent laws.

“There is a limit to my curiosity,” Hannibal said calmly, “I would like to know, but I will not risk Will’s health or happiness for it.”

Will opened his eyes and sat up, not pleased with this conversation. His dream was still playing in his head, and he hated the idea that anyone owned him.

“Not that it’s your place to decide that,” he said firmly, drawing the attention of both men.

“Will,” Hannibal said, smiling, “you’re awake.”

Will sighed.

“Yeah, I am. And I just happened to interrupt a conversation about who owns me,” he said, fixing Sutcliff with a look of mild disapproval. He was acutely aware this man held his life in his hands, and it frightened him. If anyone owned Will in that moment, Sutcliff was terrifyingly close. “The answer to that is no one. I am my own person, Doctors. I would appreciate it if you would at least have the courtesy to have those kinds of conversations behind my back instead of over my sleeping body.”

Sutcliff appeared only mildly chastised, but Hannibal’s expression grew worried. Will steeled himself for an argument he didn’t want to have, the images of his dream flashing in his mind.

“The laws about this may be vague,” Will said, feeling his claws threatening to come out, and forcing them back, “but you’ll have a hell of a fight on your hands if you try this. I said no.”

Sutcliff conceded, though Will got the feeling he wasn’t done trying his luck.

Will cursed his own nature and the fact it was rare. Being a rarity was all well and good in theory, until people like this tried to get their hands on you for their own purposes.

And Hannibal had just been sitting there discussing it.

Will tried to calm himself. He knew he had missed the beginning of their conversation, and didn’t have the full story. He also knew Hannibal had never done anything to indicate he would even entertain such an idea as Sutcliff had been suggesting. He wanted to believe Hannibal wasn’t like that.

So Hannibal would have to make him believe.

Sutcliff left, making some excuse though Will could see he felt caught in something, which he had been. Will wasn't at all sorry to see him go, only worried what he might do if they made a habit out of upsetting him. The man had more power over Will than Will liked, and Will hoped he hadn't realized it yet.

Will fixed Hannibal with a look he hoped came off as calm and level. For his part, Hannibal didn't appear guilty.

"I think I deserve to know what was said before I woke up," Will said as evenly as he could.

Hannibal nodded.

"Doctor Sutcliff explained to me that he believes I am in a unique position. I am a psychiatrist who could declare you unable to make your own decisions, and I am both your friend and your employer."

Will knew Hannibal was about to bring up the consent laws, and it frightened him. He had unwittingly given Hannibal that much power over him. It had happened gradually, not all at once like he had always expected if he ever found himself on a leash.

Will had been giving over pieces of himself to Hannibal since the day they met.

A dark corner of his mind recalled an essay that had claimed all wolves had an affinity for submitting to authority, Manifest more so as they were closer to their canine natures. Wolves, searched for an authority to become the "leader of the pack", and would blindly follow whoever they fixated on. He was sure the author of the essay would have given him one glance and confidently claimed Will had found a worthy leader in Hannibal Lecter, and had quickly come to heel.

"Apparently," Hannibal continued, unaware of Will's internal struggle, "the laws around manifest wolves and their abilities to make these decisions on their own are somewhat loose. Doctor Sutcliff thought to propose we use you as an experiment, both medically and legally. I rather think he wants to know if he could get away with it."

Will grit his teeth together, holding back a growl as best he could. Hannibal was right about that. He was sure Doctor Sutcliff would be willing to walk right to the edge of legal without looking back. He was curious, and saw Will as something not entirely human.

And wasn't that just about right? Will wasn't human, and the illness had put him further and further from it as it progressed. He was more wolf than man these days.

"I bet he could have," Will agreed, "might still could if he doesn't realize he should stop. The laws are loose on purpose. It's difficult to get any manifest on a jury or committee. We don't get a say in the laws for our own rights, just because we're not common enough. If anyone wanted to ask for our input, which they don't, they would have to find us first. Therein lies the rub."

23

Hannibal was enthralled.

Will was growling lowly as he spoke, apparently unaware of it. He was angry.

Hannibal was growing to love this aspect of Will more and more. His anger was righteous and burning. Hannibal wondered if Will had been tormented by this kind of prejudice all his life, and was impressed by how far Will had managed to get in the face of such opposition. He had been fighting the system every step of the way, and was successful despite it all.

Will was a strong and cunning boy, and Hannibal wanted him very much.

“Will,” Hannibal said, “I will do everything in my power to help you.”

Will’s eyes flashed dangerously, and Hannibal felt a thrill run up his spine.

“That’s the damn problem, Hannibal,” Will said lowly, his tone dangerous and angry, “you’re always there when I need you. If I was anyone else, that wouldn’t be a problem. If I was anyone else, that would be just fine for a friend to support his friend. But I’m not *anyone else* , Hannibal. I’m a Manifest Wolf, and all of this just makes it look like you have me on a goddamn *leash* . But that’s half of the dichotomy I have to live in. I’m either a danger to society, violent and aggressive, or I’m some rich man’s *pet* . There’s no in between.”

Hannibal was grieved to hear of Will’s constant struggle. To this point, Will had managed to walk the delicate line between these two perceptions of wolves, careful to be neither aggressive nor submissive. He had been stubborn, but kind and respectful. It was a delicate game, and Will had played it marvelously.

And he would have continued to do so if he had not become ill.

In some ways, that made the illness worth it in Hannibal’s mind. Dragging Will out of his fragile middle ground and freeing him to become what he had always been meant to be.

But not like this. Hannibal didn’t want Will on a leash, his or otherwise. He didn’t want a despondent, complacent little thing. Hannibal would much prefer Will embrace the other side of his nature.

“What would you have me do?” he asked, trying to conceal his desperation. He didn’t want Will to know how he felt. Not yet.

Will sighed and shook his head, his ears flopping in that way Hannibal found far too endearing.

“I’ll have to figure out something,” Will said, looking tired despite all the rest he had been getting, “you just do what you normally would. This is my circus, and I have to deal with my monkeys.”

Hannibal nodded. He was unhappy to hear he could do nothing to help, but thrilled at the idea Will would do something to assert his position. Hannibal could not predict what he would do, but he was sure it would be glorious.

Will lifted his head and sniffed the air, his ears perking up a bit and he smiled.

“You brought food again, Hannibal,” he said, tipping his head, “once again saving me from that industrial cafeteria stuff.”

Hannibal smiled and pulled out the containers. He was only too pleased to rescue Will from that rubbish they called food.

Will was dozing fitfully when the door opened. He expected it to be Doctor Sutcliff again, here to try one more time to get Will to agree to testing. Will was almost well enough to leave, and he could see the desperation whenever the Doctor came into the room.

Will took in a deep breath, planning to pretend to be asleep so Sutcliff would have to come back later. But what he smelled was not the familiar, sour scent of the man’s expensive cologne. It was something fresh, but mixed with the scents of chemicals and death. Like from a morgue.

And wolf. Whoever it was, they were a wolf. Not manifest, but wolf all the same.

Will opened his eyes and saw a woman making herself comfortable in one of the chairs. He was pleased to note that she was at least not sitting in the one Hannibal usually occupied, though he couldn’t be sure if she had done that on purpose or not.

“Hi,” Will said, sitting up and rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

The woman smiled, and Will got the feeling he was going to like her.

“Hey,” she said, “I hope I didn’t disturb you. I was going to wait until you woke up if you were asleep.”

Will shook his head.

“No. I was only dozing. You were going to wait? You know that could have been hours.”

She grinned and shrugged. Will got the impression she was here under someone else’s direction, but she wasn’t doing things clinically. He was curious about her.

“What can I say? I’m a girl who can wait,” she said, and Will smiled along with her, “And you look like you need your rest. I doubt I’d make you like me any more if I woke you up just to talk shop with you.”

Will huffed a laugh and nodded. He did like her, he decided. Whoever she was, and whatever she wanted with him, he liked her as a person.

“Speaking of which, why did you stop by? My brain might be on fire, but I’m pretty sure we’ve never met.”

She laughed.

“Yeah. You got me. I’m Beverly Katz. I work with Jack Crawford. You’ve met *him* . I’m here to pose an offer on his behalf. He got the idea you’d blacklisted him from the hospital or something like that.”

Will huffed again and shook his head.

“Nope. Didn’t do that, but I hope you won’t mind if I say I’m a mite glad he didn’t try his luck, though. He was smart to send you. Did he tell you it was because you’re a wolf, and I might be more likely to agree if you ask me because of that?”

Beverly tipped her head, looking at Will as if only now really starting to understand him.

“He didn’t, but I guessed as much. I wasn’t sure you’d be able to tell, though. Not many wolves can smell it under the scents from the morgue and the labs. I wasn’t about to bring it up, either.”

Will shrugged.

“The illness made my senses stronger. I think the treatment has dulled them a bit again, but not all the way. What’s the pitch, then? What does uncle Jack want from me?” he asked.

Beverly nodded.

“He wants exactly what you suggested in the first place. We only have two days before the full moon, and he wants you to help him catch the killer. He isn’t having any luck on his own.”

Will really did like her. She was direct and concise, not beating around the bush or sugar coating anything. She was just laying it out for him so he could decide what to do.

“I’m in the hospital,” Will said, gesturing to the room around him, “how is he planning to get me out of here for the plan to go through?”

Beverly shrugged.

“Staff has already been notified, and I’m cleared to take you to the office the moment you agree. *If* you agree, of course. Jack just wanted to cover all his bases, and hope for the best. You still get to make your decision, but just know either way is totally open.”

Will nodded thoughtfully. He appreciated her direct way of talking, and how she was doing absolutely nothing to pressure him into doing what Jack wanted. He was sure Jack had asked her to argue for his side, and wouldn’t be at all pleased to see her now, but it was better. Will liked her very much.

“Two days until the full moon,” Will considered aloud, then made a mental note of his condition. He didn’t feel bad anymore. He thought he should be fine.

And this might be better.

“Okay,” Will said with a nod, “I’ll come. Just give me a minute to dress, and I’ll go with you. Let’s catch this guy.”

Will decided he wouldn’t tell Hannibal about this until later. Better to ask for forgiveness than permission, and Will knew Hannibal would try to talk him out of it. He just hoped Hannibal wouldn’t be too angry.

Hannibal had said he would support Will in helping the investigation, and Will was trusting that. He might have been taking advantage of it.

“You will have to come back here after your part is done,” Beverly said as they left the hospital, “since you’re not officially discharged yet. You’re well enough to leave, but only for a field trip. Got it?”

Will nodded, half sure they would end up running into Hannibal at any moment, and have to explain what they were doing.

“I thought as much,” he told her, “but it’ll be nice to get away for a while. My neurologist thinks I’m a glorified guinea pig who just needs to come to terms with it.”

Beverly pulled her lips back in a snarl, and Will was glad she was a wolf. It had been clever of Jack to send her. Will felt like she could understand.

“Of course he does,” Beverly said, enough venom in her voice to validate Will’s own feelings, “I’ll just bet he’s been talking to all his doctor friends about you and what this could mean for the medical community.”

Will huffed a laugh and nodded.

“He tried to get my boss to declare ownership,” he said.

Beverly actually growled at that, and Will felt some tension leave his body. It was good to talk to someone who could actually sympathize. Hannibal did his best, but his sympathy was largely hypothetical. He didn’t have any reliable reference for understanding.

“Those stupid Manifest consent laws,” she said, her knuckles pale against the wheel as she drove, “If you need a good lawyer, I know a gal, and she’s good. She could argue a man out of his own shoes.”

Will grinned, and his tail thumped steadily against the car door.

“I think I’ve got it pretty well handled,” he told her, “but if I need anything I’ll let you know.”

Beverly nodded smartly, and they continued on their way.

This was good. Will had decided he had to make other connections to soften the influence Hannibal had over him and build a better support system. He had thought it would have to wait until he was out of the hospital for good, but this was even better. He thought Beverly would be a good friend, and wouldn't help Jack bully him into anything. She had her own reasons for standing up for him, and he liked that.

"Are you going to be one of the agents I go with today?" Will asked, daring to hope.

Beverly gave him a sympathetic glance, and Will knew right away what the answer was.

"Sorry, Will, but I'm strictly lab material. Forensic. This is the closest to the field I expect to be for the foreseeable future."

Will nodded, disappointed but not surprised. Jack had probably picked the only wolf on his team, hoping to soften Will up. And it had worked.

"Alright," he said, "I guess that was too much to hope for. What do you know about it, though? Do you know who I'll be with?"

Beverly considered that for a moment. Will thought maybe she wasn't supposed to tell him, and he had been wrong to ask. But she answered, and didn't seem to have any reservations when she did.

"I don't know for sure," she said, "But I'd guess Greenfeld and Lark are the guys on your team. I'd warn you about them, because they can get nervous when it comes to Manifest Wolves."

Will frowned. If they were nervous around Manifest Wolves, why would they be chosen for this task?

There were two potential answers Will could think of. One: they were the best guys for the job, or the only ones capable of it. Two: they didn't have anyone who *wasn't* nervous around Manifest wolves.

Neither option was much of a comfort to Will, but he supposed he had little choice in the matter. These were the men he was going to work with, and then he would be done with the whole thing. No more serial killer cases for him.

They reached the building where Jack's office was, and Will felt his tail wrap around his leg nervously. He didn't know what to expect from Jack or the other agents. He was just glad Beverly was there with him.

Even though he really wanted Hannibal.

Jack smiled when he set eye on Will, but Will felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. Jack's eyes were greedy. They saw Will without Hannibal, and he thought he could take the leash for himself. He could get under Will's skin, now, because no one was there to protect him.

Beverly's presence was a comfort, even though she was technically on Jack's side.

“Will,” Jack said, apparently not in the mood to bother with formalities, “come take a look at this.”

Will moved towards the desk hesitantly, not sure what to expect. He felt all the blood drain from his face when he saw the pictures of a new crime scene.

“This must have happened while I was in the hospital,” he murmured.

Jack nodded.

“About two days ago,” he confirmed, “and now we’re looking at another full moon. Do you still think that would mean a massacre?”

Jack was watching Will intently, as if his face might give away some important piece of information.

The woman in the pictures stared up at Will, her hands clasped together in supplication as her elbows rested on the mattress of her bed. She had been posed to pray, and on the bed was another message. This time in thick black paint scrawled on the sheet.

Deep Blue Sea

“Yes,” Will said, “and this time she’ll go after wolves.”

Will heard Beverly’s quick intake of breath, but didn’t process it. He was staring into the eyes of the dead woman, as she prayed to a god that had not cared to save her. He had the crazy feeling it had been him.

“You’re sure?” Jack asked, sounding nervous, possibly only for Beverly’s benefit.

Will nodded.

“She probably has a few people in mind already, and they might not all be wolves, but she’s getting more angry, and wolves are the real subject of her anger. They’re like her, and she hates it.”

Jack was quick, calling people to his office and getting things going. Will was momentarily put to the side as the actual agents were given orders and instructions. That suited Will just fine, and he was satisfied to be forgotten.

Beverly hadn’t forgotten him, though.

“I wish I could say you’re wrong about the killer,” she said, coming to stand next to Will, “I want to be angry at you for what you’re saying.”

Will turned and looked at her sadly. His ears were down and his tail was still. He knew why she was saying this, and he would have understood if she decided to hate him.

“I know,” he said, “this is going to set wolves back a few steps when it gets out.”

Beverly met his eyes, and she was devastated.

“More like a hundred,” she said, “especially if it is a woman. Can you imagine what they’re going to say about wolves after all this?”

Will could. Not only because he had a powerful imagination. He had done his fair share of reading up on wolf history and legislation, and he knew what parts of history were set to repeat themselves. And he had dealt with these people all his life.

“If I could change it, I would,” he told her honestly, then looked at her curiously, “why *aren’t* you angry with me?”

Beverly smiled sadly.

“It’s not your fault,” she said, “You and I have similar jobs, I think. At least in this case. Neither of us can change what the evidence says. We just interpret it. I could send my own mother to jail if I find fibers to implicate her in a murder, and it wouldn’t be because I wanted to. I understand that. It wouldn’t be fair to be angry with you.”

Will felt a rush of relief at that.

24

Hannibal smiled to himself as he carried the food to Will's room. He had made something he thought Will would appreciate, and he was excited to see Will's reaction to it. Hannibal didn't often cook fish, in deference to his own preferred meats, but seeing Will's fishing gear had planted the idea in his head.

Will hadn't mentioned Hannibal's impulsive offer to take him to a lake, and Hannibal thought it not unlikely Will had forgotten it. He had been deeply ill and distressed at the time, and perhaps it was all for the better. Hannibal hadn't meant to make his feelings so bare this soon.

Hannibal's smile faded when he saw Will's bed was empty.

Will's things were still there, his books and keys on the little table by the bed. That meant he had not been discharged.

Hannibal set down his bag in the chair and went to find out what had happened.

"How can I help you?" the young nurse behind the desk asked brightly.

Hannibal gave her his own smile, the one that he used to charm everyone he met.

"Hello, I'm terribly sorry, but where might Will Graham be? He was in room 112, and he's not there. Has he been taken for tests or some such thing?"

The girl chewed her lower lip thoughtfully as she clicked away on the computer, then turned to him with a slightly puzzled expression.

"It says someone named Jack Crawford requested him to be taken out for a while. He should be back tonight, but it doesn't say why he left. I can call Jack Crawford if you want. He left a phone number here."

Hannibal smiled brightly, internally adding Jack to the menu for the next dinner party.

"That won't be necessary," he told the nurse, "thank you very much."

The girl blushed lightly and nodded. Hannibal paid her no more mind as he returned to Will's room. He could wait.

Jack Crawford had asked for Will to leave the hospital before he was well enough to be discharged. He would be putting Will in danger, sending him out as bait. Jack planned to dangle Will in front of a serial killer who had already threatened Will's safety and had harmed him mentally.

But Will had wanted this. Hannibal had promised to support him in it.

Will had left without telling Hannibal. That hurt more than Hannibal would admit, even to himself. Will had not told him he was leaving the hospital to pursue this dangerous course of

action, likely because he knew Hannibal disapproved and wanted to avoid an argument about it. Did Will think Hannibal would be upset with him for wanting to leave the hospital early for this?

He may have been right in that, and Hannibal mentally cursed himself for being so easily seen as that. He hadn't wanted to make Will distrust him like that.

Hannibal knew Will had left of his own volition, so could not reasonably blame Jack for it, but he did. He blamed Jack and Sutcliff. Jack, for pushing Will to help with the investigation despite it clearly not being good for him. Sutcliff for pushing Will away from Hannibal by constantly pointing out the potential for a power imbalance between them. Hannibal was certain Will would have waited if Sutcliff had not been so rude these past weeks.

Hannibal wondered how long it would be before Will returned. He didn't know when Will had left, and only had a rough idea of how long their plan would take.

Hannibal picked up one of Will's books off the table and opened it to the page Will had marked with a scrap of paper. He didn't think Will would mind, and a quiet voice told Hannibal it would only be retribution for having left without telling him if Will did.

Hannibal sighed softly, trying not to let himself think that way. It wasn't fair to either of them, and wasn't a productive line of thinking. He should be preparing for what he would say when Will came back and found him reading a book with cold food by his side. That alone would be enough retribution, at least.

Hannibal decided he wouldn't be able to rest until he had at least spoken with Jack, so he pulled out his phone and dialed the agent's number. He was sent to voicemail after two rings, irking him greatly. Jack had probably anticipated an argument, and had ignore Hannibal's call.

That was rude.

Hannibal called Will instead, thinking he would ask to speak with Jack when Will answered.

Will's phone went directly to voicemail, and Hannibal knew what that meant. Will had turned off his phone, probably in preparation for Hannibal's call.

Hannibal was more than irked, now. He was angry. He didn't leave a message for either Jack or Will, sure he couldn't be reasonable in this state. Will, at least, would be able to hear his anger, and that would do him no favors.

Hannibal left a note on Will's bed, requesting Will call him when he returned. He decided it would be unwise for him to be there when Will walked in. Either one of them might do something rash, and Hannibal didn't want to risk it.

Hannibal returned to his home, and decided it was time for a new sounder from the Ripper. If he was right, Jack would insist Will help with the case, and Will wouldn't be able to refuse. He would be well again, and Hannibal could watch Will enter the mind of the Ripper. Will might fall into it the way he had with this killer, or he might step as easily as he did into these

characters they showed Jack. Hannibal was anxious to know, and impatient with everything Jack was doing.

So it was better Will was gone. They would find the killer and move on, able to focus on the next case. Hannibal.

Hannibal rifled through his business cards, carefully selecting the name of who he would use for the tableaux.

Will wasn't having to put on much of an act here, his ears down and his eyes anxious. The men Beverly had told him about were certainly anxious about him, but they showed it with hostility. It would help the case, because Will needed to look like he was merely following along while the real agents did the real work, but he was doing no favors for his tired body that was still recovering from an infection. He was getting a headache, and it was a constant struggle to not bare his teeth at them.

"Come on," Lark said gruffly, "two more offices before we're done for the day. We don't have time to waste."

Will nodded sharply and got out of the car. They were driving a regular cop car, and they had Will in the back, where there were no handles and a reinforced partition between him and the agents. Greenfeld always opened Will's door, but he had the idea one of these times he would decide not to.

But this time he had.

"Yes sir," Will said, gripping the clipboard to his chest. If anyone asked, he was an intern, and it was his job to take notes. That was his cover.

The killer would know better, though. Will knew it. The article that had been published with his picture had only identified him as an unknown manifest, but the killer knew where he worked. The killer had followed him.

They entered the building and Will stood to the side as Lark spoke with the manager they had arranged with previously. Will was getting tired, and his head hurt. But he made sure to keep his eyes open for anything peculiar.

Will was getting the sinking feeling he was the only one who might be able to spot the killer if they ran across her. He was almost certain Lark and Greenfeld had little to no idea what they were looking for, and that wasn't at all comforting.

If Hannibal had been there with Will when Jack had put this all together, he would have known what to say and how to get Will better partners. Hannibal was good with people, and smart that way.

But it was important Will do this without him. Will needed to stop relying on Hannibal for everything. He needed to get that through to his wolf brain, so he would be able to control his

shift without Hannibal's scent.
They went around the office, talking to a few of the employees, mostly to give Will the chance to look at everything.

Will met the gaze of one woman, and saw her eyes widen with surprise. He tried to get Lark and Greenfeld to go over there, but one of the guys from the office had roped them into a discussion of local traffic laws, and he was stuck. After a moment, he made his way over himself, his shoulders hunched and a nervous smile on his lips.

"Hi," he said to the woman, not meeting her eyes again, "I'm Will Graham. How are you doing today?"

The woman pressed her lips together for a moment, and Will worried she wouldn't answer. Her light brown hair was back in a low ponytail, and she was wearing very little makeup that Will could see. Overall, she appeared incredibly average. Forgettable.

"I'm doing well," she said at last, sighing softly, "My name is Rebecca Smith."

Will kept his smile in place as he took a careful breath in. He could smell Beebalm, and he knew she was the one. She was the killer.

And she probably knew he knew. She would act, do something rash, and maybe come after him specifically.

He had to tell Lark and Greenfeld.

But he couldn't just run away now that he had initiated conversation with her. He hat to at least look like he didn't know anything. For the time being.

"You're with those cops?" Rebecca asked, tilting her head towards where Lark and Greenfeld were still engaged with the man.

Will wished they would think to look around for him. If Jack could see them now, Will thought they'd get their hides tanned.

"Yes," Will said, tapping his fingers on his clipboard nervously, "they're asking about safety measures around office buildings. I'm just here to make notes on anything that's either a problem or a good solution for one."

Rebecca studied Will carefully, clearly not buying it in the least. He wasn't quite sure what to expect her to do.

His headache was getting worse, too, making it harder for him to put his thoughts together in a way that made sense.

"You look awful," she said at length, and Will thought she sounded genuinely concerned, "you look pale, and your eyes are red like you have a fever."

Will considered that for a moment. He *might* have a fever. He certainly felt like he'd been hit by a truck. He was probably putting his recovery back by strides. Doctor Sutcliff would be

thrilled.

He offered a wry smile to Rebecca.

“Well, we’re nearly done, and I’ll get myself some rest. I bet I’ll heal faster over the full moon as well.”

Will had been watching for it, so he saw the minute tightening of the muscles around her mouth. She even clenched her fists, and Will remembered the victims had all been strangled. She quickly smoothed herself back into a façade of calm normalcy.

Will wondered if she knew he had been in the hospital. She might.

“I hope you do,” she said politely, then her eyes flicked to somewhere over Will’s shoulder shoulder. He could smell Lark and Greenfeld.

Greenfeld set a hand on Will’s shoulder. Will tried not to grimace at the touch, but a flicker of understanding passed over Rebecca’s face and he thought she had seen it anyway.

“Come on,” Lark said, “we’re done here. Let’s get going.”

Will went with them, his head down and his ears low. He felt Rebecca’s eyes on him all the way out the door. Her gaze chafed against his skin, and left his nerves feeling raw as they returned to the cruiser.

“We don’t need to go anywhere else,” Will said, and the agents turned to him skeptically.

“Is that so?” Greenfeld asked, leaning against the car with his arms folded, “you know this how?”

Will steeled himself, lifting his head and standing to his full height. He tried to exude confidence, even as his heart was pounding in his chest.

“That woman I was speaking with,” he said carefully, “She’s the killer. I know it. I can explain it all if you need me to, but I’d rather wait until we’re back at Agent Crawford’s office.”

Lark and Greenfeld exchanged a glance, and Will thought they didn’t believe him. He would have to try something else.

“Listen. If he asks, you can tell him I said to go back without finishing what we were asked to do,” he said, knowing very well they would have done it regardless, “But I have some very important information to give him and I want to do it as soon as possible.”

That got them. Will thought they were probably afraid of what would happen if Jack found out they had delayed Will telling him anything that might lead to the close of the case and the capture of the killer. They only had two days, after all.

So they took him back to Jack’s office.

25

Hannibal had wanted to kill the college professor who had spoken poorly about Will, but he had decided it wasn't the right time. He couldn't yet kill anyone with a direct connection to Will. It wasn't time.

But *this* woman had said many disparaging things about Manifest Wolves, so Hannibal thought it appropriate. If Will found out what kinds of things she had said, Hannibal thought he would agree that she had not deserved to live.

Hannibal hoped Will would find it easy to step into the mind of the Chesapeake Ripper. He thought it might be dangerous for him to do so, but he didn't want to wait until he was sure Will could handle it.

Will would be well, and Hannibal hoped he would find beauty in what he saw.

Martha Meyers would become a tableau for Will, and Hannibal was curious whether Will would be able to *see* it.

"We don't have any evidence against her," Jack said, "how are we supposed to arrest her? On the word of a *Manifest* with a *brain infection* ?"

Will bit his tongue hard enough for it to bleed, stopping himself from snarling.

Beverly wasn't there, probably because Jack had wanted a chance to get at Will completely. Lark and Greenfeld were also absent, because Will had specifically asked to have them leave. He didn't think this would come back to bite him, but he didn't care much if it did. He was tired, hungry, and felt wretched after being mostly ignored by the agents he was supposed to be helping.

Will calmed himself and replied to Jack in an even tone.

"You can't arrest her yet," he agreed, "but you can watch her. Put her under surveillance. She's frightened and angry, because she saw me and I'm still helping you. She's going to do something. Probably tonight. The moment she does, you'll have reason to arrest her, and you can check her DNA and fingerprints. Then you'll have her."

Jack's expression changed into understanding, and Will had to hide his reactive disdain. Jack *should* have already thought of all this. It was his job to make plans like this, and he *should* have known it would come to this.

Will thought he must have been expecting, likely even *hoping* , Rebecca would panic and either bolt or attack Will the moment she saw him. Then, all of this would have been unnecessary. Because Will was his live bait. His sacrificial offering.

Jack hadn't thought of this, because he had been depending on the instability of the killer, and the catalyst that would be Will's presence in her place of work.

Will had been risking his life, and certainly still was in order to catch this killer. He felt anger bubble up inside him at the realization that Jack had considered him little more than intelligent bait.

He wished Hannibal was there.

"Alright," Jack agreed with a nod, as if Will had just agreed to a plan rather than propose one, "I'll have Lark take you back to the hospital."

Will felt a cold sliver of fear enter his heart at that thought.

"No," he said quickly, "If you can spare her, I'd like Katz. If not, I can arrange for myself."

He wasn't actually sure he could, but he refused to let Jack see any hesitance in his face.

Jack considered it, making Will more nervous for every second that passed, then nodded.

"Sure," he said, "I'll get her."

Will felt a flood of relief, and waited as Jack summoned Beverly.

Beverly smiled and winked when she saw Will, making him feel instantly more at ease. She congratulated him on his good work, and they headed out.

"Did they give you any trouble?" Beverly asked once they were in the car. She sounded genuinely concerned, and Will felt better just for having her there.

But he still hesitated to tell her about his fear of the agents and how they had treated him.

"You weren't kidding when you said they were nervous around Manifest Wolves," he told her at length, trying to keep his tone light, "I probably would have called it prejudice, but I understand why you didn't."

Beverly glanced over at him, her expression pained. It was clear she hadn't known how bad they were. She had only had an idea, but hadn't experienced it.

"Did they do anything to you?" she asked, her voice softer, but angry.

Will sighed.

"Technically, no," he admitted, "they only made me feel as if they *might* . I was afraid of upsetting them or else they'd leave me in the car."

Beverly winced, likely imagining a pet dog being left in a hot car by a neglectful owner.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I really didn't think it would be that bad. They're supposed to be professionals, after all. I would have expected them to act like it."

Will closed his eyes and put his head back. He hoped Hannibal would bring him dinner, but he wasn't counting on it. He would have to earn Hannibal's forgiveness first, he thought.

"At least it's over with," he said, "I found the killer, and I don't have to worry about them again."

Beverly didn't reply. She let silence fall between them, and Will dozed for the rest of the drive.

Hannibal was finished with his display, and he was pleased. It looked exactly how he had wanted it to, and he thought Will would like it.

It was late enough Will should be back at the hospital, so Hannibal took the cuts from the woman and began to prepare them for breakfast in the morning. He could not go to Will tonight, still aware of his own anger. Not unless Will called him and asked him to. It would do them both some good to sleep on the situation, and discuss it with fresh minds and eyes.

Hannibal wanted to see Will, though. He wanted it dearly, but he knew it would be best to wait.

Hannibal didn't consider Will to be delicate, but their relationship was at this time. He could feel the places where it was fraying, and times when it was strained. He knew it would only take a moment or so of careless handling for everything to fall apart. Hannibal felt there would be no chance of regaining Will's favor if he ever fell out of it. Will could hold a grudge. He had not seen evidence to support it, but he felt intuitively it was true.

So Hannibal would have to bide his time and tread softly, even as he knew Will wanted no special treatment. Will wanted to be just like everyone else, or at least be seen as such, so would not accept pandering. Hannibal had been able to convince him to accept meals and help, though only rarely or under special circumstances, but more often he refused.

Hannibal thought Will hated feeling as if he were in debt to anyone. He didn't like to accept favors, because then he felt he owed something in return.

It could all come down to ownership, in the end. At least that was what Hannibal had recently come to believe. It was about ownership, because debt was a form of it in some ways. When one owed something to anyone, that person owned a part of you until they were paid back. Perhaps it was only philosophically so, and many would argue against it, but Hannibal thought this idea is what motivated Will and his actions.

Will refused to be owned by anyone. He was determined to be his own master in all things. So he took no favors and stood his ground against anyone who tried to own him.

This illness had forced Will to accept favors from Hannibal, and now he felt as if Hannibal really did have some claim to him. It went against everything he had been working towards, and would be creating a great internal conflict.

Hannibal would have to be patient and wait until Will was fully healed before he tried to address the issue with him.

Hannibal did not want to own Will. He had been surprised to realize it, but he had no desire to put a collar and leash on the boy. He liked the idea of it fine, as many would, but if only because Will was so set against it he would not do more than consider it. It would hurt Will very badly if he tried to achieve it, and he had no desire to hurt Will.

Hannibal did not understand his compassion for Will. He had never felt this way about anyone, and he would not have expected this kind of thought of behavior from himself. His initial thought upon seeing a Manifest Wolf had applied to the position was that he would enjoy experimenting with his mind and nature. Now, he recoiled from the mere thought of doing so. And he hated Sutcliff for trying.

It was all strange and new to Hannibal. Thrilling and frightening.

He wanted to see where it would take him. He wanted Will more than he could remember wanting anything. He would see if he could get him.

Hannibal's phone rang and he answered. It was Jack, which was only a slight surprise. He would likely be returning the call he had *missed* earlier in the day.

"I saw I missed your call," Jack said, trying to sound apologetic, "I just wanted to make sure you're alright and don't need anything from me."

Hannibal suppressed the urge say something rude.

"I only wished to assure Will had gone with you," he lied, "as the nurse gave me your name when I attempted to visit him. It wouldn't do for him to go missing, after all."

Jack might have sensed the coldness in Hannibal's words, because he paused for a moment before answering.

"He was with me," Jack confirmed, "but he's back at the hospital now. You can go talk to him if you want."

Hannibal hummed in agreement.

"Did his plan succeed?" he asked, though he was sure it had, whether Jack knew it or not.

"Yes," Jack said almost immediately, "we know who the killer is, and Will thinks we should have her in cuffs by the end of the night. He says he spooked her, and she's likely to do something rash."

Hannibal nodded to himself. He knew Will would be right about that. Will understood this killer far better than any of them did. Possibly better than the killer herself.

"I trust he is being protected," Hannibal said, because he trusted no such thing and knew he would have to convince Jack to do it, "Will did say the killer may come after him, and I would think that is more likely than not."

Jack's silence confirmed what Hannibal had suspected.

"I'll get someone over there," Jack said at length, "but I don't think he'll be very happy about it. He seemed ready to be done working with my agents."

Hannibal would have expected as much. Will did not react well to anyone with clear prejudice, and the vast majority of people had. Not only that, but people like that gravitated towards careers in law enforcement. Jack might not have even cared to be sure the agents he paired with Will were the kind that could see past their own noses.

Jack could be stunningly unaware in ways like that. Mostly when it spared him an inconvenience.

"Be sure you do," Hannibal said sternly, "Will is my assistant, and I will not stand for him to be put in any more unnecessary danger."

Jack huffed lightly, but Hannibal thought he would still do what he should.

"We're watching her already," Jack said, "she couldn't get near Will without us knowing it, and then we'd get her."

Hannibal was unconvinced. This killer had outsmarted the FBI in many ways already, and losing a tail was something almost anyone could do when they decided to. He wouldn't say as much, but he expected at least one more person to die before Jack actually got his hands on the killer.

As long as it was not Will, Hannibal would be pleased.

"Just so long as you protect him," Hannibal said casually, though he thought Jack might find himself on the menu in the near future.

Jack agreed to do so, and Hannibal thought he would. Will would be safe for that night, and Hannibal would bring him breakfast in the morning.

26

This time, there was no crowd of people.

Will was being chased by a wolf, and his tail was gone. He was only a human, and the wolf he used to be was his pursuer.

The creature was fast and Will didn't know how he was staying ahead of it. By all logic, he should have been caught and devoured nearly instantly, yet he had evaded capture.

His muscles burned from the exertion, though, and he knew he wouldn't be able to keep going for long. The creature chasing him didn't tire easily. He knew because he had lived with it all his life. He had been running from it all his life.

A sharp whistle rang out, and both Will and his wolf stopped in their tracks, turning toward the sound.

It was Hannibal. He stood with that warm smile on his face that always made Will feel like smiling back. He held out his hands, palms up, beckoning.

Will stepped forward, but the wolf was faster. The animal darted forward at Hannibal, and Will felt sure it meant to kill and eat him. He opened his mouth to shout a warning, but it was too late. Hannibal had fallen to one knee and greeted the wolf warmly.

The wolf didn't hurt Hannibal. It only sat, wagging its tail and grinning as Hannibal sank his hands into the thick fur around its neck and began to pet it. Hannibal was still smiling, running his hands over the wolf's fur with careful familiarity.

Hannibal looked up at Will, and lifted one hand to beckon him closer once more. Will was entirely bewildered by this all, confused and awed. He didn't understand what was happening, or what it meant.

He fell to his knees in front of Hannibal, staring at him with wide eyes.

Hannibal smiled at him.

"There is no need to be afraid, Will," Hannibal said, his hands rubbing at the wolf's ears in a way that made the animal sigh happily and wag its tail, "You needn't run from this. It is part of you, and just like all other parts of you, it is beautiful."

Will couldn't say anything. He was too enchanted by Hannibal and the way his words curled in the air. It occurred to Will, then, that he was halfway in love with Hannibal Lecter. He hadn't meant to get so intensely attached. Hannibal was only supposed to be his employer, maybe his friend. Falling in love was not supposed to happen.

The wolf nosed up into Hannibal's hand, drawing his gaze again and that warm smile. Will was instantly envious of the wolf for taking that gaze, and wanted it back for himself.

“You must come to accept and embrace this part of yourself, Will,” Hannibal said in that same calm, even tone, “You fight society’s ideas about what you should be and how you should act, but you fight your nature as well. You have locked yourself into a delicate and precarious position.”

Will felt his body leaning forward, entranced by Hannibal’s words and drawn in like it was some kind of spell. He tipped forward on his knees and listened intently.

“You should loose these binds you have put on yourself.”

As Hannibal spoke those words, something happened just as if it really were magic.

A thick leather collar appeared around the neck of the wolf, and one around Will’s as well. The wolf laid its ears back and whined softly. Will lifted his hands and felt along the collar, pulling sharply to try to take it off. The leather bit into his skin and hurt him, making him grunt in pain and fear.

The collar seemed to get tighter and tighter, cutting off Will’s breathing. He struggled against it, gasping for air.

All at once, there was a leash attached to it, and Hannibal once again pulled it sharply so Will fell forward toward him. He was coughing and struggling, tears running from his eyes as he tried to get a breath.

“Will.”

Hannibal’s voice held such command Will couldn’t help but lift his head to meet Hannibal’s eyes, despite his struggle to breathe.

“Be a good boy. *Wake up*.”

Will was thrust into wakefulness so suddenly and fully he felt brief vertigo, as if he had jumped from a cliff.

The first thing he noticed was that he still couldn’t breathe.

There was someone on top of him in the hospital bed, and they were strangling him.

Will bared his teeth, and they grew. He saw, even in the low light, that it was Rebecca Smith. His vision improved as he shifted, his heart pounding in his ears and roaring like the ocean beating against a cliff. He was filled with fury so hot he didn’t even stop to worry about shifting back.

The shift caused Rebecca’s grip to fail, as Will’s form changed and grew. This was no domestic shift, and he would not simply become a dog.

This was his full wolf form, and she would regret having thought to threaten him.

Rebecca fell backward off the bed in her haste to get away from his large, snapping jaws, and Will heard the satisfying snap of the bones in her wrist as she landed wrong. She gave a cry of pain and fear, and Will towered over her, his teeth bared and a growl radiating from him so viciously it could have made Jack Crawford cower.

Will turned and saw that there were two other bodies. One, in the doorway, was Greenfeld. The agent Jack had sent to protect Will's recovering rest. The other was Doctor Sutcliff, between the door and Will's bed.

And Will understood what had happened.

Rebecca had come to kill him, and had found the door blocked by the same officer she had seen make Will uncomfortable earlier in the day. She had quickly dispatched him, though not by strangulation. His throat had been cut. Something much easier to do when your victim was conscious. After that, Sutcliff had stood to see what the commotion was. He had probably been trying to run a test of some sort on Will while he slept, or think of a new way to try to convince him. Rebecca had been surprised by his presence, but not thrown off balance enough to give him a chance of survival. She had killed him as well, then moved on to Will.

Strangling a man in a hospital bed. That was low. What was the world coming to?

Will chuffed softly, the nearest thing to a laugh he could manage in this form.

He climbed off the bed slowly, keeping his eyes trained on Rebecca as he did. He kept his teeth bared, pinning her in place with justified fear.

Jack had been given his chance to take her in, and this was how it had ended. It was Will's turn to see justice served, and he thought it likely to be a bit more messy than Jack had hoped.

"Please," Rebecca panted, using her feet to push herself against the wall as she cradled her broken wrist, "I'm only trying to make the world better for people like us."

Will snarled. Rebecca winced, possibly because she knew what he meant by the threatening sound.

She hadn't been making the world better for anyone, mostly because she had been sloppy. If she had been able to continue killing without being caught, no one would know it was a wolf doing it. A female wolf. If she had just been smart. If she had just been careful. Then, she might have feet to stand on with that argument. But the way things had gone, she was making everything worse.

"I can't stop it!" she screamed, her last ditch effort to earn mercy from the beast stalking towards her, "Don't you see? I can't stop it! Every day, it's the same. Every minute is the same. And every month it's the same. Can't you see that? I'm trapped in this life. Trapped in this body. Trapped in this cycle."

Will was nearly on top of her, now, and he made no move to second guess himself. She was not telling him anything he hadn't already known. He knew why she did what she did, and he

sympathized with it. But he didn't condone or forgive it.

"You don't see," she wailed, and Will could hear people all over that floor of the hospital stirring and converging to see the source of the commotion. They didn't have much time. "You don't see, because you're so free to do what you like!"

Will lowered his body, preparing for a lunge that would end this one sided conversation and this confrontation.

A flash of light, and as Will lunged he felt the cold metal of the knife plunge into his shoulder. He had forgotten she had a knife. How foolish of him.

It didn't manage to stop or redirect his attack, though. His jaws closed around Rebecca Smith's throat and his teeth crushed her windpipe.

Hot, metallic tasting blood flowed into Will's mouth, and he released her. The lifeless body of what had been a serial killer slumped against the wall. She left dark red smears on the sterile white, but didn't move again.

Will let out a low howl of pain as he moved and the knife shifted in his shoulder. He didn't know what would happen if he shifted back while it was there, but he didn't really want to find out. He would have to remove it before he could shift.

Upon trying to get at it with his teeth, Will managed only to bump it with the side of his chin, digging it deeper and causing the pain to flare again.

Will heard people gathering outside the door, and he turned quickly.

He could see them all, peering in and talking to each other about what they saw.

Will bounded over, making them all surge away from the door in reactive fear. All he did, though, was close the door against them, unable to stand their scrutiny and judgment. He leaned against it with his good shoulder, panting in pain and shivering in shock. His shoulder bled sluggishly.

Will looked out of the window, and saw the sun beginning to rise. It was morning. Jack would learn of this soon. Hopefully he would bring Hannibal, and then all of this could be worked out.

Will slumped against the door, holding it closed against anyone who would want to ogle the scene. He refused to let himself drift into sleep despite his exhaustion, afraid he may never wake up. He had no idea how badly he was hurt, and he didn't want to risk dying and letting the world tell his story for him. That rarely went well for wolves.

27

Hannibal felt his heart pounding in his chest as he hurried down the hall towards Will's room. He didn't know exactly what he could expect when he got there, just that the killer had gotten to Will, and it was bad. The agent Jack had put outside his door had been killed. They didn't know exactly what had happened, and they couldn't get in.

If Will was dead…

Hannibal couldn't even imagine how he would react to that. This, in an of itself, was frightening to him. He was unused to not being able to predict his own actions.

Surely Will was not dead, or Jack would have said as much.

Turning the corner, Hannibal was infuriated to see a crowd around the door. After the first time, he would have thought they would have learned their lesson. They were doing nothing productive by thrusting their presences towards Will, and it was rude.

Jack was among the crowd, and he saw Hannibal first. He pulled himself away from the other people in order to meet Hannibal. Hannibal wanted nothing to do with Jack Crawford just then, but he thought the man might be useful.

"Doctor Lecter. Thank you for-"

"Get them all away," Hannibal interrupted. He was not interested in hearing Jack's empty platitudes and humoring his pretense at professionalism. His only priority was Will. "They are making it worse."

Jack hesitated.

"Will won't let anyone in," he said, "He's shifted, I guess, and he's up against the door. We can't open it, but he sounds as if he's been hurt. He just keeps whimpering."

Hannibal bit his tongue against the rush of fury building in his chest. He needed to act rationally, and quickly. He needed to help Will first. Then, he could deal with all this idiocy.

"I wouldn't expect him to open the door for twenty *gawkers* ," Hannibal said, his voice low but sharp, "especially when all of them are strange to him. If he is injured, I can take care of him. But you must make every person leave this hallway. Including yourself, Jack."

Jack must have seen the way Hannibal felt, or sensed it at least, because he nodded.

"Everyone move!" He commanded, his voice not quite a shout, but loud and overpowering.

Immediately, anyone obviously hospital staff scattered down the hall. Others, visitors to the hospital who had wandered over out of curiosity most likely, hesitated only a moment before going on their way to wherever they were meant to be.

Hannibal waited expectantly, and Jack sighed.

“Alright. I’ll be down the hall if you need anything.”

Hannibal walked past him without responding to that. He was certain he would not need anything. At least not anything from Jack. This was Jack’s fault, after all.

Hannibal reached the door and set his hand against the wood. He could feel the vibrations of labored breathing against the other side, and he could hear Will panting. He took a deep breath to calm himself, and spoke.

“Will,” he said softly, “are you alright?”

There was a high whine from the other side of the door, and the body shifted against the door. The sound made Hannibal’s heart clench in his chest, and he closed his eyes.

“Will, if you can move away from the door, please do. I want to help you.”

There was a brief silence, then another soft whine and a low grumbling sound.

“Only me, Will,” Hannibal promised, “I won’t let anyone else in. I will help you.”

After another pause, the body against the door shifted and pulled away. Hannibal could hear Will panting and whining as he moved, and he could tell Will was in pain. Hannibal was hurt by the sound, and the knowledge that Will was suffering. He steeled himself and opened the door.

There was blood all across the floor, and two human bodies. The lights were off, and the only light came from the window. Will was curled up near the foot of the bed.

He was in his wolf form. His *full* wolf form that he would shift to for a full moon, or an altercation. He had shifted completely to protect himself from the killer.

The first body Hannibal had to navigate around was Donald Sutcliff. He was slightly disappointed, because this meant he would not have the distinct pleasure of killing him and feeding his flesh to Will as punishment for his poor behavior.

The other body, slumped against a bloody wall, was a woman. Hannibal assumed this was the killer they had been chasing. Her neck looked as if it had been crushed, with punctures along it where teeth may have entered her flesh.

Will was beautiful in this form. Hannibal was enthralled by him.

Hannibal walked closer to where Will was, careful to move slowly. It was clear Will was in pain, and Hannibal didn’t know what to expect from him. There was a knife sticking out of Will’s shoulder, in a place where he wouldn’t be able to take it out by himself if he tried. It was buried in to the hilt, and Hannibal frowned.

“You have not shifted back because you are unsure what will happen with the knife if you do,” he surmised, and Will gave a tired nod.

Hannibal stepped forward to get a better look, and Will limped toward him. Will let out a soft, pained sound, and Hannibal's frown deepened.

"If you can, perhaps it would be better if you could lay on the bed," he suggested.

Hannibal wanted to get Will into a position where he could examine the injury and Will would not have to move as much.

Will paused, considering for a moment, then turned and carefully climbed onto the bed. By the time he was done, Will's breathing was more labored, and Hannibal was concerned. He walked over and began to examine the wound. It was not pretty, and Hannibal was angry with Jack for having allowed it to happen. He was supposed to have *protected* Will, and this was how it had ended.

Hannibal was going to need some supplies. Ideally, he would have had a team and an operating room in case the knife had nicked an artery. He might even ask to have an x-ray or a cat scan to get a better picture of where the blade was situated. With how things were just at the moment, up to and including the fact that Will was in a shifted form, he doubted any of that was an option.

Will's ears twitched toward the door, and Hannibal quickly went over and opened it.

There was a young nurse in the hall, and she let out a surprised squeak when the door opened. Hannibal looked her over quickly and decided she would have to do.

"I need suturing supplies and lidocaine," he told her, "anything you might find in an emergency room operating theater would be helpful, and I need another set of hands. If you refuse to help me, find someone who will."

Hannibal had been an emergency room surgeon for years, and he still knew how to speak with the calm command necessary for the role. The nurse immediately straightened, falling into her habitual obedience as she hurried off down the hall. Hannibal was satisfied she would do as he asked, so he returned to Will's side.

This form of Will was so large he nearly didn't fit on the hospital bed. His long tail was dangling off the foot of the bed and he was curled slightly to keep his head and feet on the mattress. He was absolutely massive.

Hannibal took one of Will's paws and set his hand against it for a size comparison. The paw was larger than Hannibal's splayed hand, and the claws looked dangerously large. He was fascinated.

Will let out a soft sound of pain, more subdued than the previous sounds, but still unhappy.

Hannibal made a soft shushing sound and moved his hands up to Will's head instead. He carefully rubbed at Will's ears and face, watching as some tension bled out of Will's muscles. Will's tail swished lazily over the end of the bed, and Hannibal couldn't help but smile a bit.

"Everything is alright now, Will," he said softly, "I will take care of you."

Will's tongue emerged and swiped over the inside of Hannibal's wrist. It was quick, and over before Hannibal had even recognized that was what had happened. It stunned him, then filled him with warmth. His smile grew.

"Everything is alright," he repeated.

The nurse returned with a tray of supplies, and Hannibal quickly positioned her by his side after shucking off his jacket and rolling up his sleeves. She was wide-eyed and nervous, but she didn't seem to be on the verge of fainting or becoming distracted. Her panic was sharpening her focus, which was good.

"Will, I am going to remove the knife," Hannibal told him, making eye contact to be sure Will was lucid, "when I am sure there has not been an injury to any artery, I would like you to shift back if you can. That will make it easier for me to treat you. Do you think you can do that?"

Will hesitated only a moment, then nodded. Hannibal nodded in return, showing he understood.

"Nurse, please bring over a blanket for Will's comfort," he directed, knowing Will would prefer to not be left naked in front of this stranger. At least he suspected as much.

The girl brought a blanket over and Hannibal draped it over Will, covering as much as he could just for good measure.

"Good," Hannibal said, donning a pair of gloves and preparing a syringe of anesthetic for when he could suture the wound. He wanted to have this done as quickly as possible, but he would not rush it. "Will, I am going to remove the knife. It will hurt. Please try not to move."

Will gave another nod, and closed his eyes. Hannibal felt a pang of sympathy, not wanting to see Will in pain any longer.

Anyone Hannibal could find who was responsible for Will being hurt would regret it. Hannibal would make sure of it.

The killer they had been chasing was dead, the man meant to protect him from the door of the room was dead, and the doctor who had been harassing him for tests was also dead. All of that was good, but did not satisfy Hannibal. He would have rather done it with his own hands, and not let it be quick.

His one consolation was that Will had been the one to end the life of the killer. Hannibal wished he had seen it.

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Will clenched his teeth down against another howl of pain as Hannibal pulled the blade from his shoulder. It hurt. He wished he could just be done with the pain. There seemed to always be pain waiting for him around every corner.

Hannibal's hands were on him, then, staunching the bleeding and checking for arterial damage. His touch was firm and sure, and Will allowed himself to take comfort from it. He also breathed in deeply, filling his lungs with the scent of Hannibal. If anything, he knew it would help him shift back when the time came. Right now wasn't the time to try going without.

"Alright, Will," Hannibal said softly, "you can shift back now."

Will took in another breath and concentrated. He felt a nervous flutter in his chest, realizing this would be the first time he had willingly shifted in front of anyone. At least when they could see it. Hannibal had closed his eyes last time.

The shift went smoothly, and Will was sitting on the hospital bed with the blanket over his lap. He was exhausted, and just wanted to fall asleep.

"Good," Hannibal said, sending a shiver down Will's spine as he recalled his frightening dreams, "You can lay down, Will."

Will layed down, wincing as the movement caused his shoulder to flare with pain again. Hannibal helped him, his warm hands sending electric pulses across Will's skin. Will remembered something else from his most recent dream. The realization he was halfway in love with Hannibal. He felt his face flush, and hoped it wasn't noticeable.

"I am going to apply an anesthetic before I suture the wound," Hannibal said calmly, his tone soothing, "and I will examine it again to make sure the shift has not concealed any damage from me. All you need do is relax, now."

Will remembered he could talk now, and cleared his throat.

"I'll fall asleep if I relax," he said, feeling his eyes beginning to close of their own. His voice was rough and painful, and he remembered he had been nearly strangled by Rebecca before he had shifted. He lifted the hand on his good arm to brush at his neck, and he saw Hannibal's eyes follow the movement.

Immediately, Hannibal's expression changed, first flashing with a hot fury Will had never seen in Hannibal's face before, then settling into a cool and dangerous anger. Will wondered who that anger might be directed at, and what might happen for it.

"I really shouldn't let myself fall asleep," he said, swallowing past the pain in his throat, "I don't know if I would wake up."

Hannibal's face fell, and he seemed almost distraught. He closed his eyes briefly, then smiled sadly.

"I will take care of you, Will," he said softly, "you may sleep, and I will assure that you wake, fully pieced back together as much as I can see to. You will not die if I have any say in the matter."

Will smiled and closed his eyes. He didn't really care if he woke up, regardless, but he felt more at ease knowing Hannibal was there, and doing his best to keep Will alive. Will trusted Hannibal, and in any case, he thought Hannibal wouldn't let them villainize him after his death. If he died, Hannibal would at least defend him.

Will was asleep, and Hannibal worked quickly. He cleaned and sutured the wound, hoping Will would not suffer an loss of mobility in his arm. If he were the type to pray, he would have. He was slightly concerned that Will was able to sleep through the process, as it was not something one would usually be able to remain asleep during. He hoped he had not made a mistake in allowing Will to sleep.

The nurse was doing well, not speaking and doing as Hannibal asked without hesitation. He was glad of that, at least. Will had actually been remarkably lucky with the wound, as it had not severed any tendons or major blood vessels. He did not need major surgery, as far as Hannibal could ascertain, though having a few more thorough examinations of the wound would be advisable.

Hannibal would have to find out how far he could reach to get Will what he needed. He had influence, but he knew what he wanted was becoming more difficult to get every moment. Will was too involved, and now a doctor had died while attending to him. Hannibal would be hard pressed to find another doctor willing to work with Will just now, regardless of his innocence.

Finally, Hannibal was finished. It would scar, and was liable to leave Will sore for years yet, but the immediate danger was through and dealt with.

Stripping off his gloves, Hannibal turned to the nurse.

"I appreciate your help," he told her, "and I will be sure you are rewarded for your competence."

As he spoke, Hannibal moved to leave the room, thinking to find a competent doctor and finally speak with Jack. A sound stopped him, though. Will whined softly in his sleep, as if he knew Hannibal meant to leave.

Hannibal thought it very likely he did.

Hannibal turned back to the nurse with a soft sigh.

"Perhaps you could do one more thing for me," he said.

The nurse gazed at him with wide, amazed eyes. Hannibal realized she was impressed by him for some part of what he had just done. She was elevating him in her mind. He put it aside to consider later.

“Of course,” she said, hiding her eagerness well.

Hannibal smiled to show his gratitude.

“I would like you to find a doctor to send here. One you trust and who has some level of skill. I would also like to speak with Agent Crawford. He should not be difficult to find.”

The nurse nodded smartly, and turned to the door. She was gone with hardly a glance at the two dead bodies. Hannibal decided he liked her, and would make good on his promise to reward her.

He returned to the side of Will’s bed, looking down at his face with warmth in his chest. Will had blood smeared on his face from when he had killed the woman, and it nearly covered the dark bruises around his throat from when she had tried to strangle him. Those bruises made Hannibal angry, though he knew he could not punish the person who had put them there. Neither could he truly blame Jack entirely, as he *had* posted an agent at Will’s door to protect him. Jack had done as he was asked. It just hadn’t been enough.

Hannibal would ask for supplies to clean the blood off of Will, as he doubted Will would want to wake in this state.

Will made a soft chuffing sound in his sleep, and a crease momentarily appeared between his brows. It soon smoothed, and Will’s ears flicked around as if he were listening to many sounds all around him.

Hannibal wondered what he was dreaming about, and hoped it was pleasant.

While Will’s dream was not precisely pleasant, it was not the nightmare he had grown accustomed to over the years.

There were people all around him, reaching for him. At first, he flinched away, certain they would grip and bind him as they always did when he was caught. But instead, they only touched. They passed their hands over his clothes, skin, hair, and tail with firm gentleness, as if to touch was their only directive.

Then, he heard what the voices were saying. He heard their words, curiously filled with awe and worship. They touched as if he might impart some divinity or blessing from his flesh alone. As if he really was that deity which the woman had thought him.

They were praying to him, and asking to be blessed by him.

Will felt suffocated by it. This was not the hate he had grown to fear, but a love with the same terribly intensity. They would drown him, all the while thinking they were only doing what he deserved by worshiping him in this way.

Will began to push them away, baring his teeth and growling. His followers pulled away, but only for a moment, and returned with burning speed like a forest fire. They moved in a tide and swelled, overpowering him and making the air noxious with the fumes of religion.

There were no chains, no collar or muzzle, but Will was held just as immobile and trapped. He could not escape their fervor.

Will bit, his teeth rending the flesh nearest to him and filling his mouth with the taste of blood. That taste that was all too familiar to him, and which he refused to acknowledge he sometimes relished.

The moment the bite was complete, the crowd pulled away, all presences moving as one and leaving him panting and alone.

Will looked around, finding walls of mist to every side, blocking his vision starting five feet in any direction. He was well and truly alone.

Will looked down at himself, and froze. He was covered in handprints of blood. They covered nearly every inch of his body, though he could have counted each individual one if given the time.

He could still taste the blood in his mouth, and he saw that his own hands were also covered in blood.

He let out one, piercing whine despite himself, filled with despair and anguish.

At once, there were hands at his face, cupping his jaw tenderly, offering comfort rather than harm. The hands were warm and familiar.

He looked up and saw Hannibal, there, kneeling before Will and cradling his face in his warm hands.

Hannibal did not ask anything of Will. He did not demand anything. Hannibal did not insist Will be perfect or good or bad. He never had.

That was why Will had grown to start loving him. Hannibal never took from him, but always offered to Will. When Will needed Hannibal, Hannibal was there. Hannibal gave, rather than took. That was what separated him from nearly everyone else. He never took anything from Will. Hannibal nearly smothered Will in offers for small gestures. Meals, rest, company, comfort. Everything Will had gone so long without. Those were the things Hannibal offered, with no expectation of getting anything in return.

“Oh, Will,” Hannibal sighed, drawing his thumbs over Will’s cheeks and catching the tears Will had been unaware of shedding, “you need not cry. You are not alone in this darkness. I am standing right beside you.”

Will smiled.

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Will felt something warm and wet on his face as he slowly swam back to consciousness. His first thought was that he must have been crying in his sleep, and it was his tears. When he opened his eyes, he saw Hannibal there, using a cloth to wash his face.

“You came quick when they called,” Will remarked, his voice still rough and painful in his throat, “you smell like you didn’t even make breakfast before heading right here.”

Hannibal stared at Will for a moment, as if there was something he wasn’t entirely sure how to say. There was deep emotion in his gaze, and it almost made Will want to look away.

Eventually, Hannibal broke eye contact first, looking down at his hands and the cloth tinted pink with blood from Will’s face.

“I worried you were dead,” he confessed softly.

Will felt those words strike him in the chest like a blow. They were utterly sincere, and almost too much for Will to bare. Instantly, he felt as if he was *more* than just halfway in love with Hannibal, but he knew he couldn’t do anything about it. There was no right way to act on those feelings. At least not at the moment.

“Not dead,” Will assured him with a wry smile, “just about, though. And I can’t be sure I’m better off this way.”

That had been the wrong thing to say. Will felt it, and he saw the way it pained Hannibal to hear it. Hannibal had never liked Will to say anything self-deprecating, but just now he seemed particularly vulnerable. He was emotionally tired, by the looks of it.

“Sorry,” Will said, “I didn’t mean it.”

Hannibal offered a tired smile.

“I hope you don’t truly feel that way,” Hannibal said, “and that I can do something to help you feel as if you have a place in the world.”

Will regretted having said it, if only because it had made Hannibal make that face.

“You do,” Will told him, “all the time. I’m just stupid and have a hard time accepting good things. I always expect the rug to be pulled.”

Hannibal nodded in understanding and continued to gently rub the blood from Will’s face with the cloth. It was soothing and comforting, and Will found himself leaning into the touch despite himself. He didn’t know how to react to this feeling of being cared about and for.

“Can I get something to drink?” Will asked, wanting to get the taste of blood out of his mouth. It was hard to think.

Hannibal nodded and stood. Will mourned the loss of contact, but pushed that feeling away.

Hannibal returned with a cup of grape juice, and Will was glad it wasn't just water. Maybe Hannibal knew why he had asked for it, or maybe not. It didn't really matter.

Will drank the juice slowly, trying to ignore the way it mixed with the blood before washing it away. Hannibal continued his careful washing, moving down Will's neck to gently clean over the marks Rebecca had left on his throat. His touch was so gentle and feather-light Will couldn't help but wonder if he was actually getting the blood off or not, but he instinctively grimaced as the bruises were touched.

"I am sorry this happened," Hannibal said softly, and Will looked up at him as he spoke, "I cannot keep myself from wondering if I might not have been able to stop it."

Will frowned. That didn't make sense, because Hannibal hadn't caused it at all. Not to mention, he might have been killed, himself, if he had been there. She had managed to get the better of an FBI Agent, after all.

"Why?" Will asked, confused and concerned.

Hannibal huffed softly, as if finding some bitter humor in Will's question despite his better judgment.

"I was quite upset with you yesterday," Hannibal confessed, and Will realized why immediately. Still, he let Hannibal continue without interruption. "I would have tried to convince you not to follow through on the plan with Jack, and so I cannot blame you for concealing it. Perhaps I was also upset with myself for having made you feel it was necessary. Regardless, I did not think I could speak with you rationally. That is why I did not bring you dinner. In a selfish, juvenile way, I suppose I also thought to punish you by so doing. It was wrong of me, but it is done."

Hannibal paused for a moment, and Will thought maybe he was finished, but eventually Hannibal continued.

"If I had come, I might have known the agent was not enough, or I might have stayed and been able to be there when it happened. I might have at least been able to wake you and warn you instead of letting her attack you while you slept."

Will waited as Hannibal said all this, and let a silence drop between them after he had finished. Then, Will had his own confession to make.

"I was upset too," he admitted, and Hannibal looked at him with an expression of vulnerability he hadn't expected to see, "I was upset with you, even though you hadn't done anything. That's why I went behind your back about the plan."

It was Hannibal's turn to remain silent as Will spoke. He watched Will with that expression of unhappy vulnerability, and it amazed Will. Will felt compelled to match that expression with his own vulnerability. He was about to confess something to Hannibal he hadn't ever thought to confess to anyone.

It could either end well or extremely poorly.

“I had a dream,” Will said, and saw the way Hannibal’s posture changed minutely at the realization Will was about to say something sensitive, “I’ve always had nightmares, and they always deign to feature the people in my life. When your face finally showed up in them, it was worse. It made me realize how much power I give you, and it frightened me. I’ve spent my entire life avoiding letting anyone hold any power over me, because it’s dangerous. It’s dangerous because it’s like a form of ownership, and I can’t let anyone own me, or let anyone think someone owns me. I’ve been fighting that battle my entire life. So I set out to cut some of the ties between you and I. I wanted to act without you, be my own.”

Will swallowed hard, aggravating the bruises again and wincing at the pain.

“That didn’t turn out so well.”

Hannibal was silent. He just studied Will’s face as if he could read every thought and feeling that crossed it, the minutiae of Will’s manners. It would normally have left Will feeling exposed and uncomfortable, but just then it was only warm and familiar. Will didn’t mind it at all.

“Perhaps someday you will feel comfortable enough to tell me about these dreams,” Hannibal said at length, his voice soft and kind, “but I hope you trust that I would never take advantage of any influence I might have over you.”

Will smiled, sighing softly.

He thought about pointing out the times Hannibal had, those little things he had done. Like showing his disappointment when Will was going to do something he didn’t approve of. Eating fast food or pushing himself when he was exhausted. Will had pushed back most of the time, but there were plenty of times he had given in and done what he knew Hannibal wanted of him. If Hannibal hadn’t noticed, it probably wouldn’t do any good to point it out at this point. It would only make Hannibal completely self-conscious in the future, and strain their relationship more.

And that wasn’t the point. The point wasn’t that Hannibal had the ability to influence Will to change his behavior and habits. That wasn’t the problem.

The problem was that Will was too worried about being seen as weak or submissive. It came back to that spider silk thread he had been balancing on all his life. The one separating aggressive and weak. Will had kept on it for most of his life, swaying back and forth as he must to keep his balance, but never falling off. He worried about it. He didn’t want to fall, but that meant he would be endlessly pushing his own limits to control every part of himself. It was exhausting, and he wanted to be done with the act. He wanted to be free.

Before Will came up with a proper thing to say in this situation, the atmosphere was shattered by Jack Crawford and a forensics crew entering and turning on the light. Beverly was there, which was a small mercy, along with a couple of men Will had seen at one of the scenes before, but hadn’t officially met.

Will blinked against the bright fluorescent lights, his ears twitching at their quiet hum. Jack stared at him with a cocktail of emotions Will didn't really want to parse out at the moment.

"Sorry for the delay, Doctor Lecter," Jack said, "The nurse said you wanted to talk to me, but I had to get the team here to document the entire mess."

Will looked down at his hands, folded together and twisting in his lap. He didn't know how to face Jack in this moment. He had killed a woman. He probably still had traces of her blood on him, and there wasn't really any question of whether he had done it or not. The evidence said it all, and he wasn't about to lie about what had happened either.

Will had never killed anyone before. He had expected it to change him in some fundamental way, make him look at the world through different eyes. Make it harder for him to imagine being a serial killer, because his own feelings mixed with those of whoever he was trying to get into the head of.

He felt no different, just yet. He might still have been too much in shock to notice, but he felt alright. He felt pretty much normal.

Aside from the stab wound in his shoulder.

"Apology accepted," Hannibal said primly, turning in his seat to face Jack, "I want to ensure nothing happens to Will because of this incident."

Jack looked shocked, and Will looked up at Hannibal with a small bundle of warm hope unfurling in his chest. Hannibal was going to make everything alright.

"What the hell would happen to Will?" Jack asked, sounding honestly bewildered.

Will chuffed, the sound almost a scoff. Jack was sometime incredibly naïve when it came to the disparity between his status and Will's.

Hannibal was unfazed by Jack's reaction to the request. He might have expected it.

"I imagine there will be questions as to whether or not he acted with excessive force, and it may come down to a debate over his nature. I want to be sure there is nothing said to make anyone believe Will killed this woman in anything but self defense. Will was not meant to be put into an altercation with the woman, and I will be sure there are questions into your investigative decisions if anything suggestive about Will reaches the public in any way."

Will's tail gave a traitorous wag, which no one but Beverly seemed to notice, thankfully. Beverly just glanced up and gave him a conspiratorial smile before getting back to work. Will wasn't sure what it meant, but he was soothed by her presence, almost as much as by Hannibal's.

Jack was considering this all with an expression of intent concern. Will thought Hannibal might just succeed in keeping Will safe. Despite all the prejudice in the world, including Jack's own, Jack wanted to save face and keep in the good graces of both Hannibal and Will. He wanted something from them, so would try to placate them. If he thought a mess might

take them out of reach, he would work to make sure no mess was made or that it was cleaned up swiftly.

Will was grateful for Hannibal, even though his mind was shouting at him to not let anyone own any part of him.

But it was too late for that. Hannibal did own a part of him, though he likely didn't have any idea. Some part of Will belonged to Hannibal. That was just how it went when you started falling in love.

30

Will woke up and blinked groggily around the room. Beverly was there, watching him with casual interest. There wasn't anyone else in the room with him, even though the light from the window betrayed the time. It was day.

"Where's Hannibal?" Will asked, taking note that his throat didn't hurt as much as it had the night before, but it was still sore and uncomfortable. The bruises were probably dark and ugly, turning green around the edges.

Beverly smiled, as if she knew something he didn't.

"I think he and Jack are working together to dissuade the fanatical masses," she said.

Will frowned. He looked around for a glass of water or something, but didn't see one within reach.

"Can I get some water?" he asked, and Beverly stood to get him some, "and you're going to have to elaborate on that. I don't know if you noticed, but I'm a bit cut off from the world at the moment."

Beverly laughed and handed Will a paper cup with deliciously cold water in it.

"Well, you are now quite the celebrity," she said, making Will's heart drop with dread, "There are people trying to get in to see you."

Will closed his eyes, feeling himself trying to tremble, though he fought it. He couldn't be some weak thing. Not now.

"Why are they trying to see me?" he asked.

Beverly huffed, flopping back down into the chair she had been sitting in when he woke. She shook her head, but she was smiling a bit wryly.

"Give them another week, and they'll be singing songs about you," she said, "telling stories around a campfire. You're a local hero, Will. The big bad wolf who saved us all from little red-handed riding hood. Not only are you a *good wolf* , but a Manifest to boot. People are talking about you like some kind of avenging angel."

Will fought a whine in the back of his throat. It was all too much like his dream. As if he had known this would happen.

What would they do if they got in? Would they swarm him, reaching and grasping and caressing, just as they had in the dream? Would they ask him to tell them things, like a prophet? Would they expect him to be wise and noble and benevolent? Would they be disappointed to see he was nothing but a frightened man who didn't want anything to do with any of this?

“Are they mostly wolves, themselves?” Will asked.

He opened his eyes when Beverly hesitated. She seemed uncertain how to respond.

“I don’t know,” she said at length, “I’ve seen a couple who are manifest, but I can’t tell with the others.”

Will nodded. He should have expected that. Not all wolves could smell that another was a wolf as well. Manifest usually could, because their senses were stronger, but a regular wolf could almost never tell.

Will would have bet nearly anything that he was right, though. He thought they were almost exclusively wolves out there, trying to get to him. To them, he must have seemed like some kind of divine being. He was an example that they could be seen as good, and useful, and something other than what they had always been told they were.

But that meant he could not make a mistake. He could never do anything wrong, or he would be crucified. Either literally or merely metaphorically. He would be seen as the epitome of what wolves could be, and that pedestal was high. It would be a long and painful fall. One that was unavoidable, because he wasn’t perfect. He wasn’t even very *good* , all things told. He was broken, damaged, and unstable. He was volatile, and he should absolutely not be seen as something to emulate.

“My life’s gone to hell in a handbasket,” he said.

Beverly burst into laughter.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “That’s just a really accurate way of putting things. You’re incredibly succinct.”

Will huffed, smiling despite himself. Beverly’s joy was contagious.

“Thanks,” he said, “At least I’ve got that going for me. If nothing else, I’m succinct.”

Beverly shrugged, still grinning.

“I mean, things could be worse,” she said, “they could be calling for your pelt, brandishing torches and pitchforks.”

Will shook his head.

“I’d know how to handle that,” he said, “that’s been my whole life up to now. The problem is that this is actually worse. They want something from me that I can’t give. Even if I had something to give, they would want more and more until there was nothing left. Before, it was easy to be better than what they expected, because the bar was so low. Now, the bar is unreachable, and I’ll always fall short.”

Beverly nodded, her grin fading.

“I know, Will, and I’m sorry this is happening to you. I really am. If there’s anything I can do to help, I’ll try. I want you to know that you’re not alone in this.”

Will smiled and laid his head back on the pillows. He was already tired again. He wanted to go to sleep, if only to avoid this reality. His dreams weren’t as bad as this.

“I’m not alone, but I am,” he said, “I’m standing on a cliff, ready to jump or to fall, and I’m the only one up there. The winds will blow, and maybe I won’t fight them. Maybe I’ll let them carry me over the edge. Falling is like flying, anyway.”

There was a sharp pain in Will’s ear, and he flung his eyes open to see Beverly standing at the bedside. She had pinched his ear, and she was looking at him sternly.

“You stop talking like that,” Beverly said as Will lifted his hands to shield his ears from further assault, “that isn’t going to help any, and it’s only going to make the people trying to help you feel bad. Pull yourself together and try to do something productive.”

Will felt such a rush of affection for Beverly he almost teared up. That tough love attitude was so reminiscent of his own father, and he hadn’t had anyone talk to him like that since the man had died. No one had told him he was wrong that way, meaning for him to become better from it instead of just feel bad for it.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly, looking down at the blanket on his bed, “I’m just sorry.”

Beverly sighed and patted him on the shoulder.

“I’m not going to hurt you, Will,” she said, “but I’m not going to sit by and let you fall down that mental rabbit hole either. You’re going to get through this, and be better on the other side.”

Will took a deep breath and nodded.

“Okay,” he said.

Hannibal made his way back to Will’s room, feeling uncharacteristically frazzled. There had been a veritable hoard of people outside the hospital, and he had had to wade through them, asking them to kindly leave Will alone, just to get inside the building. He was not pleased with any of this.

This mob had been entirely unanticipated. Hannibal had expected the world to be far too set in its ways to allow for this kind of change.

They were basically worshiping Will, crying out for the chance to meet and touch him. It was entirely the opposite of what the opinion of Will had been only the day before.

Whatever had happened, it was clear Jack had perhaps done his job too well. He had not villainized Will when they offered and explanation for what had happened. They had deified him. Somehow.

But Hannibal was about to see him, and they could discuss what to do going forward. How to deal with this new development.

The new doctor was in Will's room, talking to him.

Will was sitting up in the bed, his back straight and his expression set. Beverly Katz was also there, sitting in a chair to the side. She was watching Will speak with the doctor, her expression passively amused.

"Now, mister Graham, I'm sure you understand what it is you're asking for, but I really can't agree unless there is a more settled plan. I have to be sure you will be taken care of."

Will looked over the doctor's shoulder and caught sight of Hannibal.

"I understand, Doctor Faith," Will said politely, "and I'm sure I will be able to offer you an entirely established plan in just a bit. This is Doctor Lecter. He's the man I was thinking of."

The doctor turned around and saw Hannibal. Her expression didn't shift, but she looked him up and down appraisingly. Hannibal thought he saw some recognition in her eye, and she nodded.

"Alright," she said, turning back to Will as she spoke to him, "You should talk it over, and once you have a better idea of what you want to do, I can let you know if that will work."

Doctor Faith walked up to Hannibal and offered her hand.

"Hi," she said with a polite smile. She looked rather young, but Hannibal could already tell she was used to that, and she was smart. "I'm Doctor Faith. After what happened to Doctor Sutcliff, I'll be taking care of Will's case. Are you Doctor Hannibal Lecter? I've heard of you."

Hannibal nodded, offering his own smile.

"I am," he said, "though I am no longer a medical doctor."

Doctor Faith nodded. She had already known that. She really had heard of him.

"Yeah. You work in psychiatry now. Probably a lower fatality rate in that line of work, right? Well, if you're really the person Will had in mind, then I think his plan will be just fine. Let me know what you decide, so I can help you arrange everything. Will's recovery is my top priority. I'll let you get to it, now. I have a few other things to get to, but I'll be back to help you with whatever you need."

Hannibal decided he liked Doctor Faith well enough. She was smart, to the point, and wasn't pushing Will to anything. She was nearly polar opposite of Donald Sutcliff. She would be fine to help Will.

"Thank you very much for your help, Doctor Faith," Hannibal said as she turned to leave.

She nodded and closed the door behind her. Professional and polite. Not lingering too long and making them wish for her to leave. She was doing very well.

Hannibal turned to Will and smiled.

“You have a plan,” he mused, “what might that be?”

Will took one deep breath, glancing at Beverly for some kind of support. She offered a smile and a nod, which seemed to bolster his confidence.

“Yes. I want to be discharged from the hospital. It looks like my jaunt with the FBI didn’t do wonders for the encephalitis, but I didn’t really expect it to. The only thing is that I need to be discharged into the hands of someone able to make sure I take my medications and don’t overexert myself again. That’s why I had you in mind. You can monitor my condition and be sure I’m taken care of. It’s going to mean you and I both take more time off of work, but that can’t really be helped unless you would rather I stay here so you can get back to the office. If we do this, it will get me out of the public eye, and out of this stuffy hospital. I don’t know about you, but I’m sick of the smells.”

Hannibal smiled.

That was actually a wonderful idea. It would help immensely with this new debacle they were facing, and of course it wouldn’t hurt to have Will depend on him for this. The mere fact that Will was asking it of him showed progress. He wasn’t rejecting the idea of being helped. Not by Hannibal, anyhow.

“That sounds perfect,” Hannibal said, and noted the way Will’s muscles relaxed a bit from the tensed posture he had been holding himself in, “I will have to find somewhere to take you that is not my home. That would be too easy for them to find, and they appear quite dedicated.”

A bit of color rose to Will’s cheeks, and he looked up at Hannibal through his long, dark eyelashes, smiling sheepishly.

“Somewhere with a lake?” he offered softly.

Hannibal felt as if someone had taken his lungs in their hands and squeezed. His breath caught in his throat, and he realized Will remembered. Will remembered that impulsive offer, that impromptu promise Hannibal hadn’t known he was prepared to make or keep. That revealed his secret desires.

Will remembered, and he wanted it too.

Hannibal smiled again, pushing past his surprise.

“Somewhere with a lake,” he agreed.

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Hannibal was busy making arrangements. Some of his patients were complaining that they were missing so many appointments, and Hannibal offered them sycophantic apologies explaining that he could do nothing about these circumstances. Most were understanding, and none threatened to see a different psychiatrist, though Hannibal offered them temporary referrals if they felt they needed to speak with someone while he was unavailable.

Franklyn was the only one who truly annoyed Hannibal. He had very nearly whined, saying talking to someone else wouldn't help because they didn't know him. Hannibal had been sorely tempted to tell him they would know him well enough about thirty seconds after meeting him, but he had refrained. He was in far too good a mood to fall victim to his own annoyance.

Now, all that was over, and Hannibal was left to the more pleasant part of the arrangements.

He had found a bright little lakeside cabin he could bring Will to. The lake was small, hardly more than a pond, so there were no other cabins or campsites sharing the shore. It would be all theirs.

Hannibal began planning their meals, and making lists of what they would need to bring. The information for the cabin said fishing was allowed, so Hannibal made the menu flexible to allow for whatever Will might catch.

He could only imagine how Will would look, shining in the bright morning sun as he waited for any slight tug on his line. Hannibal knew he would be beautiful, and he couldn't wait to see.

Beverly Katz was proving a great asset to Hannibal, on Will's behalf. She stubbornly defended Will any time she thought a conversation was somehow snubbing him, and she was always pestering him to eat more and stand up for himself. Hannibal was half sure she was the one who had convinced Will to ask for Hannibal to take him away. For that, he was grateful.

Whenever Hannibal needed help to settle something, which was not often, Beverly was there. She had fended off Jack when he tried to ask Will to stay, and convinced Doctor Faith that Will really would be fine, that Hannibal wouldn't let him pull the stitches or make himself more ill.

Despite having known Will for only a short time, it seemed Beverly had become his friend.

Part of Hannibal was jealous, didn't want Will to have anyone but himself. He knew, logically and objectively, that it would be a very good thing for Will to have other people in his life, to have a support system of friends. He was aware of it.

That didn't mean he was happy with it. He wanted Will to depend on him, for him to not need anyone but Hannibal.

Hannibal brought lunch to Will's hospital room, being let in through a back entrance to the hospital to avoid the throng of new worshippers. He had an extra serving of food for if Beverly was there today. She was, more likely than not.

"Well, then we found this bit of metal, the kind from a pipe threader. I was the one to find it, I'm not too humble to tell you that. We tracked down every work site that used that kind of pipe and had machines that matched the grooves, and-"

Beverly cut off when she saw Hannibal in the door. Will turned and grinned brightly.

"It smells amazing, Hannibal," he said, "as always. Beverly was just telling me about how they caught the Minnesota shrike."

Hannibal nodded, entering the room and beginning to set out the food on the table.

"It sounds fascinating," he said, "I had no intention of interrupting. Please continue, Agent Katz."

Beverly hesitated a moment, watching him set out the dishes. Perhaps she was less comfortable talking around him, or she thought he might not be interested in the story.

At length, she decided to continue.

"So we had a handful of construction sites, and everyone was out looking for any clues as to who our guy might be. It took us forever, and five more girls went missing before someone noticed one odd thing."

Will was listening intently, his body turned toward Beverly and his ears up and pointed at her. He was enthralled by the tale, entirely engaged. This state explained why neither of them had known Hannibal was there before he entered the room. Will was usually attuned to all sounds.

"There was one resignation letter that didn't list an address."

Will's eyes grew wide. It was like he was a child, listening to a ghost story at a campfire. He was silent, barely even breathing for fear of missing some part of the tale. It was adorable.

"Every one of the workers left a phone number and address, except for Garrett Jacob Hobbs."

Beverly nodded solemnly, as if Will had said something about the story, or perhaps gasped in surprise as a child might have. She was a very good story teller.

"When we showed up to interview him, he cut the throats of his wife and daughter," Beverly said, "he pushed his wife out onto the front step, as if to distract us while he got to work with his daughter. It took him longer to kill her. He was crying, and he didn't want to do it."

"She looked just like all the missing girls."

Will's tail was thumping, and his eyes were riveted on Beverly, though they didn't meet hers. He was staring at her forehead.

“The missing girls, who had been eaten, and made into pillows and knives.”

The corner of Will’s mouth twitched, and Hannibal guessed Will had already come to that conclusion for what had happened to the girls. He hadn’t been surprised by this twist, but he was pleased by it. He was fascinated by it.

“He was a cannibal,” Will said softly.

Beverly smiled wryly.

“He didn’t see it that way, really,” she told him, “they were werewolves. He wasn’t. He didn’t see them as people. Or, he didn’t see himself as the same as them. I don’t think he thought of them as less. At least not his daughter. He really seemed to love her. Maybe a little too much.”

Will considered that.

Hannibal wondered if Will was getting into the head of Garrett Jacob Hobbs, or if he was merely thinking about it in an academic sense.

“You’ve talked to him,” Will said at length, “you caught him. He’s in prison. You can talk to him about this stuff.”

Beverly nodded.

“Not me, personally, but we’ve got psychiatrists and legal people who talk to him,” she said, “he’s pretty freaky. Basically went entirely mental after the arrest.”

Will mused over that for a long moment, his tail going still as he went deep into his own mind. Hannibal tried not to be too obvious in his staring because, while Will was too distracted to notice, he thought Beverly might be more perceptive than he had given her credit for.

The food was all set out and ready, three places set because Beverly was there. Hannibal would have preferred to have a private meal with Will, but he didn’t begrudge her presence there very much. Soon he would have Will all to himself for much longer.

“I wonder what he would think about me,” Will said, his voice so soft Hannibal almost didn’t catch what he had said.

“What?” Beverly asked, not because she hadn’t heard, but because she didn’t understand.

Will looked up at her, his gaze distant.

“He idolized his daughter, because she was a wolf. I’m curious to see what he would make of my recent idolization.”

Beverly frowned and didn’t respond. She seemed concerned, as if Will might try to get in and speak with the Minnesota shrike just to find out the answer to his idle wonderings.

Hannibal knew better. He knew Will wouldn't do anything foolish like that. Will really was only idly considering it. Will had no interest in a killer who had been caught. Will hadn't so much as mentioned Rebecca Smith since the ordeal. As if she no longer interested him, despite how deeply she had been into his head and him in hers, to the point where he had worried about getting her out after the fact. She was dead, and that seemed to have cured Will of her influence.

Or perhaps it was because *he* had killed her.

"Lunch is served," Hannibal said, turning both their heads toward him, "Miss Katz, there is plenty for you as well."

Will slid out of the bed and padded over, his tail swishing with satisfaction. Hannibal pulled out his chair for him, and Will sat at the table to begin eating. Beverly smiled awkwardly, and Hannibal could see she was going to attempt to refuse.

"It is in thanks for your help to Will," Hannibal told her calmly, "I would feel very badly if you did not accept. I cannot thank you enough for what you are doing for him."

Will rolled his eyes, though he might not have known Hannibal saw it. Beverly hesitated a moment more, then sighed and stood up.

"Alright," she said, "but I want the record to show I didn't ask you to feed me."

Hannibal smiled and pulled out her chair for her.

"Indeed," he said, "the record may show that I stubbornly insisted on it."

Beverly laughed. She seemed to be calmed whenever she saw Will acting calmly. If Will was nervous, she became agitated as well. But when Hannibal was there, and Will was smiling, she seemed more at ease and pliable.

Hannibal wondered if this was some sort of pack mentality. She was a wolf, after all, and she may have been picking up on Will's emotions and subconsciously reflecting them. This would be even more likely if she saw Will as some sort of authority.

Which begged the question: Did Beverly feel the same way all the wolves being kept outside the hospital did?

Hannibal was curious, but he was in no hurry to find out. She was of less concern to him than Will. And there was much to do with Will at the moment.

Hannibal pulled out his iPad and opened the pictures he had saved of the cabin he would bring Will to. He set it on the table and slid it over to Will.

Will's eyes grew wide with wonder when he saw the picture.

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Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will was delighted. The pictures of the cabin and the lake were beautiful. It was as if Hannibal had known exactly what Will wanted. As if he had reached into Will's mind and pulled out the images of the ideal he held. He had made Will's dream into reality.

"Tomorrow's the full moon," Beverly reminded them, probably more for Hannibal's benefit than Will's. Will would have been hard pressed to forget something like that.

Hannibal nodded, and Will thought he had been very careful to keep track since the last time. He refused to repeat what he considered a mistake that large.

"Indeed. Our timing could not be better. So long as our plans go through."

Will's tail was thumping steadily, and he scrolled through the pictures of the cabin. He was so excited for it.

He could imagine sitting on the short little dock, the sun shining as he felt the line for any bites from the fish. He could imagine the wind in his ears as he ran through the woods under the full moon.

But mostly he imagined Hannibal. How Hannibal would look in the dappled sun, how Hannibal would smile as he always did when Will entered the room, this time with no other expectations or obligations for them to be concerned about.

Will wondered if Hannibal would change at all when they left the city. A lot of people did, their attitudes shifting with the new set of sensory input. As if their environment was a jumble of ingredients, being processed in their head to create whatever output made them act the way they did.

If Hannibal changed, Will was curious to see. He couldn't imagine Hannibal acting very differently from how he always had. Hannibal seemed so solid and unchanging.

It would be interesting, regardless.

"I wish I could swim in the lake," Will said, reaching up and touching the stitches through the bandage without thinking, "In that way, Rebecca Smith had terrible timing."

Hannibal and Beverly were both silent, making Will realize he had said something either strange, insensitive, or both. He looked up to gauge it.

Beverly looked uncomfortable, staring down at her food as if she didn't know what to say and being absorbed in lunch would absolve her of the obligation.

Hannibal, though, was looking at Will curiously. As if he wanted to peel back the layers of Will's skin to see exactly what made Will the way he was.

The disparity between the reactions was only further confusing to Will. He had no idea what he was supposed to do in order to diffuse this awkwardness.

"Sorry," Will said, feeling his ears drop and his tail curl around the leg of the chair.

Hannibal smiled warmly.

"You need not apologize, Will," he said, "you have not said anything wrong."

Will frowned down at his own food. He was pretty sure he had. Beverly wouldn't look that way if he hadn't said anything wrong. He just didn't know exactly why it had been wrong. It just had been.

There was a soft knock on the door, and it opened to let Doctor Faith in. As always, her eyes flicked briefly to Will's neck before she smiled and met his eyes.

Will had nearly panicked once, when he had caught sight of the bruises in the bathroom mirror. It looked like a collar. A declaration of ownership.

The bathroom mirror was covered now.

"Sorry to interrupt," Doctor Faith said pleasantly, "I just brought the release forms, and I wanted to make sure you're all ready for this. We can keep you here if you would feel better about it."

Will could tell she knew he had no interest in staying at the hospital. It was just her customary way of dealing with a situation like this, and she saw no reason to deviate from the script.

"No worries," Will told her, setting the iPad aside and waving her over, "You're always welcome. I'm itching to get out of here."

Doctor Faith nodded, reflecting his smile back to him. She understood. From what Will could tell, she knew more about manifest wolves than any other doctor he had met. She had mentioned his sense of smell, once, seeming to understand the hospital would not be a pleasant place for someone who could smell as well as he could. He liked her a lot.

"Well, I have all the papers for you, and I'd like you to include contact information as well. I know you're leaving town, so it would be a good idea to let us know where you will be, in the event of an emergency."

Will nodded, accepting the papers she handed him as well as a pen. He quickly scanned over them before he signed where he needed to and passed them to Hannibal. Hannibal would read them over much more thoroughly, and be sure Will wasn't signing away his soul or anything. He would also write in the address for the cabin, since he knew it.

Will didn't worry about what Doctor Faith or Beverly might think about this gesture, this deferring of authority to Hannibal on this matter. If anyone else had been there, he would have expected them to think this was yet another sign of his submissive nature, wanting a stronger individual to take control of a complicated and difficult situation. With these two, he knew that wasn't a risk. Beverly understood how Will felt, possibly too much, and Doctor Faith was far too intelligent and shrewd to think such things about him.

"In the event of an emergency, I fully expect to be able to take care of Will," Hannibal said, smiling a bit, "but I would not begrudge you this simple gesture of good will. It would be discourteous, especially after everything you have done for Will."

Doctor Faith smiled brightly at Hannibal.

"I haven't even been his doctor for very long," she demurred, "but I always try my best. I'm glad you're pleased with me."

Hannibal handed the papers back to Doctor Faith, still sporting that smile.

"Great," Doctor Faith said, nodding to each of them, "well, you're set to go whenever you're ready, then. Just make sure you tell me or one of the nurses when you head out. You can use whatever door you want, too. Just to make things easier."

Will grinned.

"Thank you," he said, earnestly, "you're just about the best doctor I've ever dealt with."

Will turned to give Hannibal a wink.

"Aside from you, Doctor Lecter, of course."

Doctor Faith laughed lightly and headed out to care for her other patients, and file the paperwork probably.

"Well, Doctor Lecter," Beverly said, finishing off her plate of food, "you're welcome to feed me whenever you want. That was fantastic. Should we get going? I can give you the official escort out of the building, and see you safely on your way. You have places to be, after all. The full moon is a date you don't want to stand up."

Will laughed softly.

"I've tried that before," he agreed, "hell hath no greater fury."

That got Beverly to laugh, and Will was glad. She didn't laugh aloud that often, he had found. She usually settled for a smile and a soft exhale, and he had been trying to get her to really laugh since she had started hanging out in his hospital room. It was a feat.

So they packed up Will's few belongings along with the lunch dishes, and headed down to the doors. Will was anxious to see the outside of the hospital after what felt like forever, though it had only been a few days. He was also nervous about what might be waiting for him out there. He was afraid of being caught by those wolves waiting for him.

Will was jittery as they approached the door to the ambulance bay, where the staff claimed they would make the cleanest getaway. It must have been obvious from his ears flat against his head and his tail wrapped tightly around his leg. He could see Beverly glancing at him with concern.

Hannibal's hand was on Will's shoulder, then, offering warm comfort and stability. Will felt his pulse slow a bit, and he took a deep breath.

"I'm alright. Let's get out of here," he said.

And they were out, the sun shining down and warming Will's ears instantly. It was a good feeling, and he closed his eyes to savor it. Hannibal nudged him gently after a moment, and Will opened his eyes to be led to Hannibal's car. Beverly kept watch, making sure they got into the Bentley unmolested, and then gave them a smart salute as Hannibal pulled the car away from the building.

Will watched her vanish behind the corner of the building, then turned to assess what all the fuss was about at the front doors. He knew they had to drive by the crowd in order to get away, and he was too curious for his own good.

The crowd stunned Will to the point of trembling, and he felt a wave of nausea.

There were at least a hundred people there. They looked like they had set up camp, the way people did for religious speakers or shows. Devout followers of some God or faith. There were signs and banners, saying different things regarding Wolves and police officers. Some even had Will's name on them. The largest banner hung over the crowd with only two words.

Manifest Destiny

Will moaned softly and closed his eyes, feeling his skin break out in a cold sweat.

This was worse than he had expected, and just as bad as he had feared.

Will lurched a bit as the car slowed suddenly, and he opened his eyes.

"Will, are you alright?" Hannibal asked, deeply concerned, "you are very pale. Do you feel ill?"

Will took a few deep breaths.

"Yeah. I feel ill. Just get us away from here, please," he said.

Hannibal seemed to understand, then, and nodded. He slowly accelerated again, putting the hospital and the crowd behind them. Will focused on his breathing, forcing himself to calm down. He still felt ill, and his heart was like a bird trapped in his ribcage, but he didn't think he was about to vomit in Hannibal's car. That was good.

They pulled up to Will's apartment, and Will was glad there at least weren't any people waiting outside here for him.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: I debated over making the title of the fic Manifest Destiny, but I thought that might give the wrong idea. Manifest Covariance is more accurate to the plot, in my opinion, so it all worked out.

Enjoy <3

33

Chapter Summary

Anyone up for some traumatic childhood memories? I know I sure am! *^^*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will was clearly nervous about Hannibal being in his apartment, despite the fact Hannibal had already seen it. In basically this exact state, no less.

Regardless, Hannibal tried to alleviate Will's worries as much as he could.

Will was rushing around the apartment, gathering whatever he thought he would want for the trip. He also stopped to make his bed, apparently not in the habit of leaving it in such a state, regardless of circumstances. Hannibal stood by, prepared to help the minute Will needed anything to be carried. He was anxious to help Will, but didn't want to be overbearing about it. He believed Will was in a delicate place at the moment concerning help and favors.

Oh, and wasn't that just the trouble? Hannibal knew Will didn't want to be treated as if he were delicate, nearly as much as he had no desire to be treated as dangerous. Will didn't want Hannibal to have kid gloves on with him, yet just now Hannibal felt they were what was called for.

Will was emerging from the back room with a tackle box in hand when he suddenly froze in place. His entire body tensed, and he lifted his chin as he inhaled deeply.

Will smelled something.

"What is it, Will?" Hannibal asked, immediately recalling the last time he had seen Will in this exact posture.

"Beebalm," Will said quietly, and a shiver passed over him, "She was here. She was in my apartment. She must have come here before she went to the hospital. God. Why was she here?"

Hannibal stepped forward and carefully pulled Will into his arms. Will was trembling slightly, and Hannibal felt it against his chest. Will was frightened, though the woman was dead.

"You are not in danger from her any longer," Hannibal promised him, "you have no need to worry."

Will shook more violently, pressing his face into Hannibal's shoulder. He made a soft whining sound, and Hannibal wished he knew what to do.

"I didn't tell you everything," Will whispered.

Hannibal tensed slightly in surprise. He wasn't sure what Will might be about to tell him.

"I met her before."

That certainly hadn't been what Hannibal would have expected to hear.

"Rebecca Smith. I met her when I lived in Louisiana. Or, at least, she met me."

Hannibal was silent, just holding Will. The fact that Will was allowing him to do so while he was awake and human in form was not lost on Hannibal. He was sure Will must be distressed for this to be the case.

"She was my psychology teacher's daughter. She was already grown up, in her twenties while I was in high school still. She had an essay set for one of her college classes, and she was writing about werewolves. She wanted a manifest to interview, and I was the only one in town."

Hannibal could feel Will's heart beating like a small, struggling animal against the bars of his ribcage. He wanted to do something, anything, to calm Will down a bit. His heart ached for his want.

"She kept asking me to answer her questions. I didn't want to. I've never wanted to be singled out. She was relentless. She started following me home from school, watching me everywhere I went, always asking."

Will's shoulders heaved with a quiet sob, and he whined again.

Hannibal decided to take a risk, and lifted one hand to Will's hair. He petted through it gently, testing to see how Will would react to the touch.

Will stiffened initially, surprised, but then fell lax against Hannibal again. He was alright with it.

"Finally, I agreed to answer her questions. I was so tired of being afraid of her. I just wanted her to go away. She bought me ice cream."

Will sobbed again.

"I think this is all my fault," Will said, "I told her I liked being manifest because I didn't have to live by the moon's schedule. I could do what I liked. I was a know-it-all. I basically laid it all out for her, how following a schedule like that was suffocating, and *I didn't have to* ."

Will gripped Hannibal's jacket tightly in his hands, still trembling.

“I’m the one who caused all this,” Will said, “All this suffering and death. It’s all because I had to smart mouth someone who was already obsessed with me.”

Hannibal made a soft shushing sound, trying desperately to process all of this. If Will had known the entire time, or even for some time while this was happening, why hadn’t he told anyone? They could have been more prepared, possibly, if they had known this about her past.

But he couldn’t ask Will these things just now. Will was in no condition to be interrogated.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Will said, and Hannibal nearly jumped, “You’re wondering why I didn’t say something sooner. The truth is that I forgot. I forgot about it all. I didn’t want to remember. I didn’t remember until just earlier today.”

Something must have triggered the memory. Hannibal thought he knew *when* it was, just based off of Will’s actions today and when he had seemed particularly upset, but he didn’t know what the stimulus had been that triggered it.

“It was the banner,” Will said softly, as if he could truly read Hannibal’s mind. It was frightening, in all honesty. “The banner. It’s what she ended up titling her essay. She sent me a copy. It was horrifying to read.”

Hannibal sighed softly and turned his head so his nose was buried in Will’s hair. He breathed in, wishing he knew what to say. He was a man so rarely at a loss for words, but with Will he seemed to never know exactly what words were needed. Will was so unpredictable he feared taking the risk.

Hannibal wasn’t used to this kind of feeling.

“She always liked Beebalm.”

Hannibal closed his eyes, taking deep breaths in an attempt to regulate Will’s breathing as well. It seemed to be working, as Will’s heart beat less furiously in his chest and the trembling had lessened.

That, at least, was good.

“I’m sorry,” Will said, his voice so small Hannibal only heard him due to their proximity, “I should have remembered. I should have known. I should have told you.”

Hannibal shook his head, Will’s hair tickling his nose.

“None of this is your fault, Will,” he said gently, “you did not remember. Your mind was protecting you by hiding this from you. It’s all over now. You have no more reason to fear her.”

Will took in one long, deep breath.

“I can’t get rid of her,” he said, his voice even and resigned, “Even after she’s dead, I’m stuck with her ghost. Maybe I’ll never be free.”

Hannibal didn't say anything to that. He knew any attempt at reassurance was likely to make this situation worse. So he just held Will, wishing.

And Hannibal hated the dead woman. He had already hated her for hurting Will, leaving him injured and marked, but now he wished she were alive so he could kill her himself. He would cause her as much pain as he was able before she died. It was not fair that Will carried her with him like this, after he had triumphed over her.

At last, Will sighed heavily, pulling away from Hannibal and leaving him feeling strangely empty.

"God, I'm sorry," Will said, "You're probably thinking twice about spending any more time alone with me. I'm a complete train wreck of a person."

Hannibal shook his head and smiled gently.

"If anything, I am more convinced than ever that this will do you good. You need a break from all this."

Will gave a watery smile, one that showed his doubt.

"Okay," he said, and they carried his things to the car.

Will once again felt guilty for taking advantage of Hannibal. He hadn't even had the excuse of his illness messing with his head, yet he had clung to Hannibal like a lost child. It was embarrassing.

And now they were going to be alone together for at least a week. Will thought he had made everything very awkward.

At least Hannibal seemed unperturbed. As he always did. Hannibal was just driving along, his expression pleasant and soft music pouring from the radio. He exuded calmness, and Will was grateful for it.

"Will you tell me about it?" Will asked shyly, and Hannibal gave him a questioning glance, "Your plans for this trip. I-" Will wasn't sure exactly how to explain why he wanted Hannibal to talk to him about it. "Your voice is calming."

Hannibal's expression softened.

"I'd be happy to," he said, "tonight, I will make lomo saltado for dinner, and we can sit by the lake to eat. Before dinner, though, we should go on a walk to become familiar with the area."

Hannibal continued, and Will found he was drifting off to sleep. Maybe Hannibal's voice was too calming.

Will laid his head against the window, feeling the cool glass against his ear. He closed his eyes and listened to Hannibal talk about what they would do while staying in the cabin. It all sounded lovely, relaxing and beautiful.

Will fell asleep with Hannibal's voice in his ears.

Chapter End Notes

Just noticed this fic has been going for a whole year as of one day after I posted the previous chapter. So, happy birthday to this fic, and happy anniversary to The Wrath of the Lamb. Enjoy this chapter. <3

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Hannibal was tense with his desire.

Will was asleep in the car as Hannibal carefully navigated the woods leading up to the cabin. One ear was propped up on the window, the other flopped down in Will's hair, giving him a lopsided look. His face was so soft, and his expression so vulnerable. He looked absolutely angelic in the dappled light coming through the windows.

Hannibal was certain he would not be able to make it through this trip without doing something about these suffocating feelings.

He would have to make himself vulnerable to Will, and Will could either destroy or exalt him. There were no other possible outcomes.

Hannibal was unused to being vulnerable to anyone in this way. His emotions were always carefully guarded, only shown in measured amounts in order to get what he wanted. With Will, all that had been stripped away and he was left entirely bare. Will could do what he wanted with Hannibal, and he had no idea yet. Bringing it to Will's attention would be Hannibal turning to clay in Will's hands.

It was so very dangerous for Hannibal.

Yet he was thrilled by it all.

Hannibal had a folder from Jack, and intended to "accidentally" let Will see it. He hoped Will would become interested in the case, and want to look at it. It was Hannibal's creation, and Hannibal hoped Will would look through his eyes. He wanted Will to see him in that way.

Hannibal thought he could hold out for that long. He thought he could keep from doing anything he might regret until Will saw the file. If everything went in Hannibal's favor, it would not be too much of a risk.

If not, it would be a potentially fatal one.

Hannibal pulled to a stop in front of the cabin. Will didn't wake from the lack of movement. He must have been sleeping very deeply.

Hannibal stared at him for a long moment, wondering what would happen while they stayed at the cabin. This might be one of the last moments he had to see Will so comfortable in his presence.

At length, Hannibal reached over and gently shook Will's shoulder to rouse him.

Will jumped, glancing around with wide eyes. When his gaze landed on Hannibal, Will visibly relaxed.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to fall asleep,” Will said, “I guess these past few days have been more stressful than I thought.”

Before Hannibal could respond, Will looked out the window and saw the cabin. His face lit up with a grin and his tail thumped.

“It looks perfect,” he breathed, and Hannibal felt a well of satisfaction grow in his chest. He had chosen a good place.

“Let us go inside,” Hannibal said, opening his door and stepping out into the warm forest air.

Will was quick to join him, his tail swishing excitedly as he got what he could carry from the trunk. Hannibal watched him carefully, making sure he was gentle with his injured arm. Hannibal took Will’s large duffel bag and they both went to the cabin.

The moment they were through the door, Will set his things down on a table and began exploring. Hannibal could hear him sniffing curiously as he poked around the fireplace and the couches. Hannibal wondered what he could smell, and if he liked what he found.

Hannibal carried Will’s bag to the bedroom Will would be using. His own was next door, so they would not be far from each other during the night, but to Hannibal just now it felt like miles. He tried not to think about it. It really wasn’t the kind of thing he should be thinking about.

Hannibal left the bag by the foot of the bed and went back to the front of the cabin. Will was no longer there. He must have gone off to explore the rest. Hannibal set out to look for him.

He knew it would be simple to call out for Will, and Will would reply, but Hannibal was not in any hurry and it felt far more fitting to the circumstances to find him this way.

Hannibal listened for footsteps, or anything that would give away Will’s position, but he couldn’t hear anything.

He could actually hear a myriad of sounds from the woods just outside the cabin. Just nothing that had anything to do with Will. It seemed the walls did very little to keep those sounds out. He thought Will would like that. He made a note to ask.

Eventually, Hannibal found Will on the back deck. It was a large structure that overlooked the lake and made it possible to see over the trees on the opposite bank, off into the horizon. The view was beautiful, but couldn’t compare to how Will looked.

A soft breeze blew Will’s hair back from his face, and he had his eyes closed. His face was tilted up, and he was taking in deep breaths. He looked calm and at peace.

“It’s beautiful here,” Will said, but didn’t turn toward Hannibal, “It’s like a dream.”

Hannibal smiled and stepped forward to stand at the rail alongside Will.

He looked out over the water, and for a moment he thought he could see it the way Will did. An oasis, a respite from the chaotic world he was constantly buffeted by.

He could understand why Will liked it.

“I’m glad you are pleased,” Hannibal said, feeling as if he had to speak carefully to preserve the calm in the air, “I want this to be a time of rest for you.”

Will opened his eyes, and a beam of sunlight caught them, making them shine a brilliant blue when he looked at Hannibal.

“You’re not upset about what I said at my apartment?” he asked.

Hannibal sighed softly.

“I am upset, but none of it is directed at you,” he said, “I am displeased that she was allowed to harm you in all these ways. I wish someone had protected you from her.”

Will turned to look back at the lake. Pensive.

In all honesty, Hannibal wished he had been the one to protect Will from the woman. Even of this, a part of Will’s past, Hannibal was jealous.

“There’s no point in being upset about something you can’t change,” Will said, sounding as if it was more to himself than to Hannibal, “Anger is only worth feeling if it motivates you to make change.”

Hannibal considered that. It was strange, and sounded like something one might expect to hear from a southern preacher. Or perhaps a misguided youth counselor. Hannibal wondered where Will had learned this mentality.

If this is what Will believed, it explained a few things. Will had never shown much anger, instead showing fear or despair. When Will was angry, he didn’t act on it. He was repressing all his anger, because he believed it wasn’t productive.

That must have been why he had also repressed those memories of Rebecca Smith. All this time, he had been hiding from his anger. Running away from it.

Hannibal wondered what he would do if he was forced to truly face his past.

“Will,” Hannibal said gently, and Will turned to him again, “you know better.”

Will startled a bit, seeming to return to the present moment.

“You are far too intelligent to believe something like that,” Hannibal continued, “you know it is necessary to feel and process all your emotions. Even when they are not productive. You have to feel them in order to get over them.”

Will closed his eyes, pressing them shut as if not wanting to see something he was being shown. A very soft whimper escaped him, and he shook his head.

“But I can’t,” he whispered.

Hannibal didn't respond.

After a moment, Will opened his eyes again, his brow furrowed.

"I can't be angry, Hannibal. Anger is too closely tied to aggression. I can't be aggressive. If I do, it just proves everything everyone wants to believe about me. I have to be better than that. I have to show them I'm not a monster."

Hannibal sighed softly.

"Do you ever tire of being better than everyone else?" he asked.

Will laughed in surprise, the sound coming out in a bark because it was unintended.

"I'm not better than anyone," he said, "don't you go saying stuff like that, or you'll end up like all those loons outside the hospital. I don't need more of that in my life. You've been the nice even middle ground so far, and I'd like you to stay that way."

Hannibal frowned.

He wished Will would allow himself to recognize his own brilliance and accomplishment. He wanted to see Will glow in the worship of others. If Will would only allow himself to be recognized.

He also wanted to see Will show his anger and aggression. Will had looked glorious, covered in the blood of that woman he had killed. Hannibal wanted Will to embrace that part of himself.

But Will was not ready for these things.

"Then, do you ever tire of making the effort to appease every single person you come into contact with? Most people do not have to expend so much energy and focus just to be average. If I were in your shoes, I would have decided to either be what they expected or be what they feared."

Will smiled, but he looked tired. Perhaps now was not the time for this conversation.

"I don't want to be feared by everyone," Will said, and his voice was filled with sadness, "and I don't want to be worshiped. I want what everyone else wants."

Will stopped there, but Hannibal knew what he meant.

Will wanted to be loved.

Will straightened quickly and took a deep breath.

"Let's go on that walk you mentioned. We only have two and a half hours before the sun sets, and it's be nice to have dinner by then, don't you think?"

Hannibal nodded, and they descended the stairs that led to the ground near the lake shore.

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The woods were beautiful. Will could hear the rustling of the leaves, the scampering wildlife, and the gentle lapping of the water against the bank. They were all sounds he associated with calm and safety.

He could also hear Hannibal's heartbeat. Whenever Will's shoulder accidentally brushed his, Hannibal's heartbeat elevated.

It could have been because of a few different things, and Will worried Hannibal was afraid of him. Hannibal had seen Will in the aftermath of Will killing a woman, and he had been covered in blood. It would make sense for someone to be afraid of him after that.

But Will didn't think that was it. Hannibal hadn't acted any differently towards him after the debacle with Rebecca. He hadn't acted differently after Will had confessed to him that part of his past where she was relevant. He never changed how he acted.

So Will thought it might be because of something else.

"Are you really comfortable with this?" Will asked as they walked, trying to distract himself from this line of thought, "I mean, being out here in the woods. You've got a city life at the moment. I guess I didn't think about if you were, uh, okay with being in the woods."

Hannibal smiled.

"I grew up with the forest as my, what would you call it? Stomping grounds, I believe. I spent much of my time outdoors as a child. We also had a hunting lodge."

Will studied Hannibal from the corner of his eye. His expression was nostalgic, and somewhat melancholic. Will wondered why, but didn't want to ask. He was already nervous about doing something wrong.

He wasn't sure he'd be able to make it through this trip without doing something about his feelings. They were all alone together out here, and he felt so safe. His chest was swelling with affection for Hannibal, and he was sure there would be a bursting point sooner than later.

"That's good at least," Will said, "I was worried I'd asked you for something you weren't okay with. I feel like I'm always asking for things without making sure you're willing to give them. That's awful of me."

Hannibal shook his head. He was smiling still.

"If you ever asked something of me I was not willing to give, I would tell you under no uncertain terms," he said, and Will believed it, "however, I can think of little you would ever ask that I would not give."

That struck Will as odd, and made his stomach twist in a strange way. He didn't know exactly what to make of it.

Will looked up at the sky, and then turned in a circle.

"We should head back. Less than two hours before sunset."

Hannibal agreed.

"Should we eat by the lake, or on the deck?" he asked.

Will smiled.

"On the deck. The sun Will set perfectly over the lake from there."

Hannibal smiled.

Will woke up with the sun. He took in a long, deep breath, filling his lungs with the scents of the outdoors. There was some wild mint growing out there somewhere. He thought he'd go out and try to find it soon. Maybe he'd suggest Hannibal use it for something, though maybe that would be insulting to someone like Hannibal. He'd think about it, at least.

Will rolled out of bed and got undressed. He hadn't heard Hannibal's plans for today, having fallen asleep so quickly, but he was sure they'd be nice.

Before that, Will wanted to run around a bit. He hadn't been able to run for far too long.

He shifted.

Will nosed his door open and padded out into the cabin.

Hannibal was already awake. Will could smell him. He was in the kitchen, probably preparing to make breakfast. Will wondered if Hannibal planned to wake Will if breakfast was ready before Will woke by himself.

Not that it mattered. He was already awake today.

Will went to the front door, so he wouldn't have to pass by the kitchen and bother Hannibal. He wanted to let Hannibal have his own morning, just as he was having his own. He wouldn't be gone long, and he just wanted a little bit of time for himself. To run like he had as a child, through the trees on four legs.

Will managed to open the door relatively silently, despite his lacking of opposable thumbs. He pulled it mostly shut behind him, then trotted down the steps and rounded the cabin.

If he didn't have stitches, Will would have immediately jumped into the lake to swim. He loved to swim in this form, and lakes were the best. As it was, he planned to take a run around the bank and maybe get his feet wet.

Will started to build up speed, feeling a few random twinges of pain from his shoulder. He didn't think they were really anything to be concerned about, so he didn't slow down. If it started to feel like he was doing damage, he would stop.

Will saw a deer bound away into the woods as he approached, and he briefly considered chasing it, just for fun. He didn't, because he didn't want to go too far away from the cabin while Hannibal didn't know where he was. That would be asking for trouble, and he had had quite enough of that just recently.

The morning was beautiful and quiet, the sounds of the forest waking up all around him much more pleasant than the noise he got in the city. He really loved it in the woods. He felt so much safer here. No one wanted to hurt him, or deify him. He could just exist as himself.

Will took a few laps around the lake, stopping every so often to dip his paws in the cool water or chase a frog. It was amazingly restorative, and he felt better than he had when he had woken up well rested. Even though his shoulder ached, he felt better than he could remember feeling.

Eventually, Will dried his paws in the grass and padded back up to the front door. Hannibal might have noticed he was missing at this point, but all he would have had to do is look out the kitchen window to know exactly where Will was.

The door was closed and latched, meaning either a change in air pressure had pushed it closed, or Hannibal had. Either way, Will couldn't get back in.

Will considered it for a moment, listening carefully. He couldn't hear Hannibal moving around inside, meaning he must have gone back to the kitchen or the back of the cabin.

So Will padded back around the cabin and climbed the stairs onto the deck. He propped himself up by his front paws so he could peer through the window into the kitchen. Hannibal was there, at the stove across the room, cooking. Will considered his options and resigned to one that had little pride in it.

Will scratched gently at the window and whined.

Hannibal turned quickly and saw Will in the window. Immediately, understanding dawned on his features, and he headed for the door. Will dropped down and met Hannibal at the door just as he pulled it open.

"Will. I'm sorry. You must have been the one to leave the front door open. I hadn't realized you wouldn't be able to get back in."

Will huffed softly and gave Hannibal's hand a quick lick to show there were no hard feelings.

Hannibal's skin tasted like sausage, eggs, and chives.

Will headed back to his room so he could shift back and get dressed.

Hannibal stood, nearly frozen to the spot.

It may not have been all that significant, but Will had surprised him by licking his hand so casually. Will had gone directly to his room, apparently thinking no more of it, so it likely meant nothing. But Hannibal felt as if his heart had stopped in his chest.

Many children are told licking is how dogs kiss someone they love. Hannibal knew this to be a slight misconception, as a dog can express a myriad of emotions and attitudes through the gesture. They were usually all positive things, still.

But Will wasn't a dog. He still had the mind and attitude of a man, even in his shifted state. So was it possible the gesture meant something more when it came from him?

Hannibal shook himself back to the present moment and washed his hands before he continued with breakfast. He was most likely making something out of nothing, because his feelings about Will were so muddled and confused. He would get nowhere by obsessing over something so small.

After a few minutes, Will reappeared, eyes bright and cheeks flushed. He looked happy and healthy. Hannibal was pleased with that.

"Sorry about that," Will said, seemingly unable to suppress his grin, "I wanted to go for a run, and I didn't think you'd go around checking the doors. I also didn't want to bother you, which is why I didn't come tell you where I was going. That's on me. I was just out back by the lake."

Hannibal offered his own smile.

"No harm done," he said, "I thought you might have left the door open, but it didn't occur to me that you would not be able to get into the cabin if I shut it."

Will nodded, looking a bit sheepish. He lifted his hand, as if to run it through his hair, but winced and dropped it back to his side. Hannibal noted it, and turned to Will with a frown.

"Is your shoulder causing you pain?" he asked, "Did you strain it during your run?"

Will flushed darker, but stood his ground.

"I don't think I did," he answered, "I just think the pain is different depending on which form I'm in. It didn't hurt as much when I was shifted."

Hannibal considered that. It was an interesting insight into Will's nature. The kind of thing Doctor Sutcliff would have sold his own kidney to know. The kind of thing Will had stubbornly refused to tell him.

And Hannibal adored him for that.

"After breakfast, I should look at it," Hannibal said, dishing the food up and beginning to set the table, "It wouldn't do to allow an infection to set in or any other such thing."

Will agreed, and helped Hannibal set out breakfast.

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Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Your bruises are healing surprisingly quickly,” Hannibal said, and Will froze.

Will looked up at Hannibal, and saw the man hadn’t taken obvious note of Will’s reaction.

The bruises around Will’s neck. He had been avoiding looking at them or thinking about them. Hannibal probably knew that. He had probably noticed the covered mirror in the hospital, and the way Will avoided looking in any of the mirrors here. Will knew he was observant, and didn’t expect this to have slipped past him.

But Hannibal also hadn’t mentioned it. He might have been avoiding the topic as well, to make Will comfortable.

Not anymore, apparently.

“Are they?” Will asked, taking another bite of his breakfast. He had tried to sound casual, though he wasn’t sure he had succeeded.

Hannibal nodded.

“They are nearly gone. Just yesterday, they were still dark, as would be expected. Now, they are turning green around the edges. If this pattern continues, they should be gone entirely by the end of the week. That is extremely rapid healing.”

Will considered that. He knew he healed quickly. He thought most wolves did, Manifest particularly. But he also had another thought about it.

“I want you to look at the stitches,” he said, “I mean, I know you were going to. I think I have an idea, and I want to know what you think about it.”

Hannibal agreed to do it, and Will thought he was curious.

Will’s thought was that shifting accelerated healing. If it was true, he could hack the system during this trip. He just had to shift frequently. And that night would be the full moon. IF he was right, they would find out pretty quick.

As they finished breakfast and cleared the table. Will was struck by the simple domesticity of it all. They were far more comfortable around each other than most employers and employees would be. It felt different than normal friendship as well. Will felt he could rightly call Beverly his friend now, but things felt different with her than with Hannibal. Will would have felt more awkward with her, unsure what was expected and not wanting to overstep any bounds. With Hannibal, it was easy.

When everything was tidied up and put away, Hannibal went to retrieve his medical bag while Will removed his shirt and sat in one of the kitchen chairs. He left the bandage on, thinking he would let Hannibal deal with it. Hannibal would do it in a better way than Will, he was sure. Not to mention, Will didn't really want to look at his injury if he could help it.

Hannibal returned and his eyes scanned over Will once quickly before dropping back down to his bag. When he raised his gaze again, he fixed it on the bandage and did not waver.

Will took a deep breath as Hannibal reached out, preparing himself for the examination.

In the hospital, Will had been able to almost entirely detach himself from the moment while the doctors had been working. It lessened the amount of stress he felt about it all, and he had been grateful for it.

But here, with Hannibal, he felt frighteningly present and solid. He was afraid to face his injury like that.

Hannibal removed the bandage and looked over the wound. Will stared at him, rather than his shoulder, too frightened of how it might look.

"Prognosis?" Will asked in a half-hearted joke.

Hannibal began cleaning around the wound, his touch gentle and kind. Will couldn't read his expression.

"You are healing quite well," Hannibal said, "In fact, far better than I would have expected. This wound looks far older than I know it to be. Do you think your shift may affect the rate of healing?"

Will grinned.

"That's exactly what I was thinking," he said, "I've always thought, sort of hypothetically, that I heal faster during full moons, and shifts. I never had anyone to confirm that, though. Tonight's the full moon. Do you think we might be able to take the stitches out early?"

Will bit his tongue. He hadn't meant to ask that. At least not yet. But the idea of getting to swim in the lake was so tempting he had said it anyway.

So he just looked up at Hannibal with wildly hopeful eyes.

Hannibal smiled and sighed softly.

"Perhaps, just so long as you do not further injure yourself. At any rate, we cannot remove them just yet. You are not nearly that well healed."

Will had known as much, yet hearing Hannibal say so made Will's heart sink regardless.

"Yeah. I know," he sighed, "I guess I'm just hoping for too much."

Hannibal's smile grew a bit. It was warm and welcoming.

“I rather think you will be able to uncover the bathroom mirror soon, though.”

Will felt his face flush, and he couldn’t meet Hannibal’s eyes.

But Hannibal tipped his head up, forcing the eye contact. His eyes were sparkling with amusement, but his expression was sincere.

“I understand, Will,” he said, “never believe I am making light of it. If you ever decide I have earned the privilege of your confidence, I would be honored. I would like nothing more than to help you with the things that cause you fear.”

Will felt a strong urge to kiss Hannibal. He clenched his hands into fists and bit his lip to stop himself from doing it. It would be impulsive and reckless. He had been trying all his life to tamp down his urges. To be better than the base animal howling in his mind.

Instead, Will forced himself to smile, using all his strength to keep it at that.

“Thank you,” he said, “I have the feeling I’ll be telling you all my secrets soon enough. Just don’t get too anxious for more. It will happen in due time.”

Hannibal nodded softly. His eyes flicked up to Will’s ears, and he hesitantly lifted one of his hands to Will’s hair.

Will froze when Hannibal began to gently card his fingers through his hair. He hadn’t been expecting it, and wasn’t entirely sure how he should react. He could easily have been offended, upset that Hannibal would assume it would be alright. But Will had allowed it before, and he had assumed things about Hannibal.

And it felt *so* good.

Will closed his eyes and leaned into the touch. His tail began to thump against the chair he was sitting in, and Hannibal let out a soft huff of laughter. Such a soft, fond sound.

“I hesitate to say this, for fear of sounding condescending,” Hannibal said gently, making Will open his eyes, “but I think it would do you good if I, or I suppose anyone, were to do this for you often. You are so seldom touched by anyone, Will, and this gives you pleasure. I can see it. You relax.”

Will flushed again, his face heating up at Hannibal’s words.

The idea had clear merit, though. That was the hell of it. Will knew he was touch starved. He had been almost all his life. The problem was that he didn’t like anyone enough, or trust them enough, to touch him like this. He had been hurt enough to fear any physicality from anyone.

But with Hannibal it was different. *Everything* was different with Hannibal. It seemed Hannibal abided by no rules, was kept by no boundaries, and feared no reproach.

And Will was alone with him in the woods. If he agreed to the suggestion, it would mean Hannibal would be providing him with those touches for the time being. Will’s idea that he would not be able to make it through this trip without acting on his feelings for the man

would be put further to the test. He was sure he wouldn't be able to withstand such a thing for very long. He was certain he would give in to his urges much sooner.

But if he refused, Hannibal would deserve an explanation. And that might prompt Will to confess regardless. It could ruin everything.

Will did the selfish thing.

"We can make it another experiment," Will said softly, "for this week."

Hannibal's hesitant expression morphed into a bright smile.

"Would you allow me to share the full moon with you?" Hannibal asked.

Will's ears perked up at his voice, then fell back just a touch as he considered the question.

"In what way?" Will asked tentatively, his tail giving a single swish.

"I would very much like to be allowed to witness your shift," he said, "And to see you enjoy yourself. I am not asking that you stay within my sight the entire night or any such thing. I would just like to be a part of it."

Will flushed lightly, his tail wagging behind him.

"Also, I would like to fix you something when you return," Hannibal continued, "I have heard the full moon burns many more calories than other nights and shifts, and from what I have seen I feel it is safe to say that is true."

Will's flush darkened, but his tail did not stop wagging. Hannibal thought he looked somewhat pleased, despite his embarrassment.

"Well, if you would really like to," Will said, "I mean, I don't want you to feel obligated. You don't have to stay awake all night or anything. I wouldn't ask you to do that."

Hannibal smiled. He knew very well Will would never ask this of him, but Hannibal believed Will wanted it. Even if he didn't consciously know it yet.

"I know, Will," he said, "I would not offer if I did not want it. But I would not want to intrude if this is a time you would prefer to have privacy."

Will nodded, considering. His ears twitched toward the window, and Hannibal thought there must be some animal out there, treading through the underbrush.

"I normally do prefer to be alone during the full moon," Will told him, and Hannibal felt a pang of disappointment, "but I think I'd like to have you there."

Will smiled shyly, his flush still prominent.

“You’re safe, Hannibal,” he said, making Hannibal’s heart soar, “you’ll never understand how rare and important that is for me. So, yes. I’d like you to be there tonight.”

Hannibal could not be more pleased. He knew he didn’t understand the significance of what Will felt, though he would like nothing more than to come to understand it someday. He thought becoming closer to Will would be the beginning of the journey to that understanding.

“Thank you very much, Will.”

Chapter End Notes

Updates may slow down for a while. I'm working on a couple of projects for October. Sorry.
On the bright side, I'm working on projects for October!!! At least two stories should go out next month, for spooky season. One is a ghost story, and the other has to do with witchcraft. So be on the lookout for those if they sound like your thing!

Enjoy <3

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Chapter Notes

It's finally the full moon! Enjoy! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will was nervous, but he was more excited.

He hadn't had anyone around during the full moon since he had been a kid. Back then, his dad had been there to make sure no one came around and tried to mess with him. Since high school, Will had taken care of himself in these times.

It would be important to see how Hannibal acted tonight, because Will really was falling in love with him and he couldn't let himself do anything about it if Hannibal couldn't handle being around Will during a full moon. If Hannibal treated him differently afterwards.

Will padded out of the room, wrapped in a sheet, his face already flushed at the idea of Hannibal seeing him like this. It was the only way, unless he wanted to sacrifice a set of clothes. He didn't.

Hannibal was standing by the fireplace, but he had left a scent trail all around the room. He had been pacing.

At least Will wasn't the only nervous one.

Will could see the full moon already up in the sky through the window, and the sight made him begin to itch with anticipation.

"Will," Hannibal said, looking a bit flushed himself, "Are you ready?"

Will offered a shaky smile. He really wanted tonight to go well. He didn't know exactly what he wanted from it, but he knew there was so much potential for it to go poorly. He just hoped nothing would go wrong.

"I should be asking *you* that," he said, "Not many people get to see a full shift like this. If it's going to make you nervous, I'd rather not do this at all."

Hannibal smiled thoughtfully. He was wearing comfortable clothes rather than his usual suits, and he looked soft in the warm light. Will wanted to press his face into Hannibal's chest and breath him in, feel the warmth and softness of him all around him.

"I suppose you are right," Hannibal said, "but I can't imagine you would ever make me uncomfortable."

Will felt his face heat up more. Hannibal had a way of making him nervous without making him uncomfortable. It was strange, but thrilling, and Will thought it probably had more to do with how he felt about Hannibal than Hannibal's actions.

"Well, that's good," Will said, not sure what he should do now. He still felt as if he was forgetting something. Leaving Hannibal unprepared for what was about to happen.

Hannibal stepped forward, closing the distance between them and setting his hands into Will's hair, making Will fight to keep his eyes open. He gently carded his fingers through Will's hair a few times, smiling softly. It felt good, and Will felt his muscles relax reactively. He felt safe.

"You must let go of whatever is holding you back, Will," he said softly.

Will couldn't do that. Not really. But he wouldn't say so to Hannibal. Not now. If he let go of everything holding him back he would do something he couldn't undo. Something he might regret.

Will closed his eyes and allowed himself to shift before he talked himself out of the entire thing.

The sheet slipped to the floor as Will's body changed, and Hannibal watched raptly, with awed fascination. His hands had dropped to his sides when the shift began, not wanting to make Will feel at all held in place.

The shift was not what media and society would portray it as. Will didn't shred his skin or look to be in pain in any way. He simply stretched, and the change happened. Hannibal wasn't certain of any other way to describe it. It was fantastical, and indescribable.

Will stood on four enormous paws and shook himself as if he were wet, his dark fur rolling in waves from his ears to his tail. He was even taller than Hannibal had calculated in this form, making Hannibal look up slightly in order to look into his face while he stood at full height.

Hannibal smiled.

"Would you like to go outside?" he asked.

Will grinned that goofy grin dogs have and walked over to the door. He sat by the door, his tail wagging excitedly and thumping loudly against the floor. He would have looked like a well behaved pet if not for his size.

Hannibal opened the door and stood to the side as Will walked out into the cool night air.

Despite his size, Will almost vanished into the darkness when he stepped off the low lit porch. When he turned back to look at Hannibal, his eyes shone with the silver moonlight. In that moment, Hannibal understood why people feared such creatures. The image was eerie despite him having known what to expect.

Will stretched, his large claws digging furrows in the soft dirt of the drive. Hannibal walked out to him, the shape of the wolf coming clearer as his eyes adjusted to the dark. He was beautiful.

Without Hannibal having to act first, Will pressed his face close and breathed deeply. He moved his nose from Hannibal's neck to his hair and then to his shoulders. As Will seemed to be exploring Hannibal's scent, Hannibal lifted his hands and sank them into Will's soft fur. It had the same texture as Will's hair, Hannibal now had the ability to tell, but there was so much more of it.

Will pressed closer, his large tail whooshing through the still night air and creating soft wind currents. Hannibal smiled and continued to pet as Will seemed to enjoy it best. Will nuzzled at Hannibal, rubbing his face against Hannibal's neck and shoulders. It was warm and affectionate, and Hannibal relished it.

Will showed affection more freely when in either of his shifted forms. Hannibal wondered why that was, but didn't dare ask Will about it in case it would make him stop. He had said Will was touch starved, and that was likely true, but Hannibal was aware he craved this just as much if not more.

After a moment, Will pulled away and turned a circle. Hannibal tipped his head to show he didn't understand, and Will chuffed loudly. He tipped his head, and Hannibal thought it was a bid for him to follow. Will started off for the corner of the house, and Hannibal followed. Will was moving at what looked like nothing more than a comfortable trot, but Hannibal nearly had to run to keep up.

Will went right up to the edge of the lake and began to splash in the shallows. It looked like he was truly and freely enjoying himself, but being careful not to get his shoulder wet where the stitches were.

As Hannibal caught up, Will put his face into the water and began to blow bubbles.

Hannibal laughed. He couldn't help it. Will's large, luminous eyes looked up at him from just above the water, and Hannibal had never been more enchanted. He felt a strong tug in his chest, as if his heart meant to bodily pull him closer to Will.

Will lifted his face from the water, his fur dripping silver droplets back down into the lake, and let out a low barking in response to Hannibal's laughter.

"May I look at your shoulder?" Hannibal asked, "you said it does not hurt as much when shifted. I am curious how it looks."

Will padded up out of the water towards Hannibal obligingly, stopping once to shake the water from his fur. The droplets shone in the moonlight, making it appear as if Will were glowing.

Will sat down in front of Hannibal, his tongue lolling from his mouth.

Hannibal carefully reached out and parted the fur where he knew the wound lay. He was genuinely curious about what he would find.

The wound was proportionally smaller than Hannibal would have expected. It was slightly larger than when Will was in his human form, but not to the extent Will's body had grown in the shift. It was still held closed by Hannibal's neat row of stitches, and it looked to be healing very well. He was sure it must be healing faster during shifts.

"Will, you are magnificent," Hannibal breathed, and felt Will's muscles shift under his hand.

Hannibal stepped back to look at Will again. Will's tongue had returned to his mouth, and now Will's head was tilted curiously, making one ear flop in that way Hannibal particularly adored.

"We shall talk about this experiment later," Hannibal told him, "for now, all you need do is enjoy yourself."

Will grinned again and stood to his full height once more. He trotted to the edge of the water and lifted his head to look at the moon.

What happened next would sear itself into Hannibal's memory. He created an entire room to hold it, in the wing he had already dedicated to Will.

Will howled.

It was not a lonesome or mournful sound as most would describe the howl of an average wolf. It was deep and strong and full of secret meaning. If Will were capable of performing magic, this would be the moment a spell fell over Hannibal. He was sure anyone who saw and heard this as he did would be unable to not fall desperately in love with Will.

Hannibal already had been, and this made his chest feel full to bursting with desire and affection.

Will cast one glance at Hannibal, his eyes shining silver again, then turned and ran into the trees.

Despite Will's size, he ran nearly silently, and faster than a horse in full gallop. In an instant, he was gone.

Hannibal let out a breath he hadn't known he had been holding, his chest feeling suddenly loose and empty.

After a few minutes, Hannibal decided to wait on the back deck. He would be able to see Will when he cam back, and wouldn't just be standing around looking lost. If morning drew near, he would prepare the meat for their meal. He knew Will would be back.

And Hannibal would be here. He would not let go of Will Graham.

Chapter End Notes

At least one more chapter of full moon antics. Maybe two. But so many fun things to come. Stay tuned. <3

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Will raced through the trees, panting and sniffing. He felt amazing. The air was clean and fresh, filled with the scents of growth and life. He felt it rushing past and through his fur, felt the earth flying by under his feet.

Oh, it had been so long since he had allowed himself to howl. It felt amazing. He didn't even care that it might draw other wolves. He doubted there were many out here, and most were friendly enough. He wouldn't mind.

And the look on Hannibal's face afterward. Will was sure no one else had ever seen Doctor Hannibal Lecter look that way. Like he had been given some divine gift.

It made Will's heart soar, and he ran faster to catch up with it. He felt amazing.

The moon raced along with him, sending snatches of silver light through the leaves and making Will feel powerful. As if nothing could stop him.

Eventually, Will slowed to a stop, breathing heavily and his heart racing. He felt amazing.

Hannibal's laughter. It sill echoed in Will's ears and within his skull. He hadn't ever heard Hannibal laugh so freely. He must have really caught him off guard to earn such a sound. Will hoped he would be able to make Hannibal laugh like that again.

A low howl rose in the still night air, and Will lifted his head, his ears standing up and turning to locate it.

The sound was coming from somewhere near the cabin. They must have followed his voice from earlier.

Will lifted his own howl in reply, wanting whatever wolf it was to follow him. He didn't want them near Hannibal.

Most wolves were nice enough, but Will didn't like the idea of them running into Hannibal out here. They might not be as pleasant if they thought a human was intruding on their turf, or if they smelled Will on him and thought he was out here to exercise his *pet* .

A gentle breeze picked up, carrying the smell of the other wolves to where Will stood. They were not manifest, so he had no reason to feel threatened by them. There were at least two, but he thought there might be three. A family, or a pack.

Will thought about what he would do when they got there, listening for their approach.

If he was honest with himself, Will also didn't want them near Hannibal because he didn't want Hannibal to see them. He didn't want Hannibal to become fascinated by these other wolves. It was juvenile and probably foolish, but that was how he felt.

Will heard soft footfalls coming closer, and he knew there were indeed three of them. One sounded smaller, and less coordinated. A child.

He saw their eyes first, shining out from the darkness. Then they stepped closer and revealed themselves.

He had been right that one was a child. Probably around fourteen years old. Learning from their parents.

The leader of the small pack was a sandy brown shade, and she eyed Will warily. He was much larger than them, and she rightly kept her distance. The other adult was a dark grey, and he stood with the pup protectively. Will wondered if they expected him to be hostile. Probably. Manifest wolves had a reputation for aggression.

Will bowed his head to show he meant no harm, but remained standing. He was not deferring authority.

The sandy wolf bowed her head as well, and the grey wolf nudged the pup to indicate they should follow suit.

Will's tail swished, and he saw the sandy wolf relax at that evidence he truly meant no harm to her family.

It was nice to see a family together on the full moon out here. Will had never really wanted company, because most wolves you could run into on a full moon were either looking to force others into forming a pack with them as the leader, or wanted a manifest to come along and gather them into the fold. Will had never wanted a pack, and still didn't.

These wolves seemed happy, though, and didn't want to have anything to do with him, besides perhaps friendly acquaintanceship. Will was willing to give them that.

The sandy wolf tipped her head towards her companions, then lifted her nose at Will.

Where is your pack?

Will considered that for a moment. She assumed he had a pack, despite finding him out here by himself. She didn't think packs had to be wolf exclusive.

Will huffed softly and turned his head back towards the cabin.

The sandy wolf nodded, then turned and headed back off into the trees. Her family followed her. Will wasn't sad to see them go, but he wondered if they were disappointed by the meeting. If they had expected more of him.

Will looked up at the moon and sighed through his nose. He stood for a moment, just breathing in the cool air.

Will loved the night.

Hannibal tried not to be anxious. He knew there was probably no reason to be worried about Will. Will was more than capable of taking care of himself.

But there were other wolves out there tonight, and Will was still in the early stages of recovery from his injury as well as the encephalitis. Hannibal had heard the other wolves howling. He had somehow known right away it hadn't been Will, though he had only heard Will's howl the one time. And he had recognized Will's voice when he howled in reply.

The other wolves had been close. Hannibal had known when he heard them. But they had apparently followed the sound of Will's response deeper into the woods. Will was somewhere out there with them.

Hannibal was worried about him.

And Hannibal was unreasonably jealous of what unique kind of bond Will might have with these other wolves. Will had claimed he liked to be alone during the full moon, but perhaps be only meant for the actual shift at the start. Will might enjoy meeting and socializing with other wolves once he was out there. He could easily attract others to him and form a pack or family for himself. All without Hannibal.

To calm his nerves, and hopefully take his mind of the ridiculous idea, Hannibal decided to sketch. He wanted to draw the moment when Will had stood by the water, head tilted up to the moon, and howled. He supposed it was a cliché, especially if there was not something to scale Will by. He might look like nothing but an average wolf.

Hannibal sketched it out anyway, recalling the way Will had looked, and the powerful sound of his howl in the still night. Will was truly a magnificent creature, and Hannibal hoped he would accept Hannibal when he learned the truth of his nature.

Will's adamant refusal to do anything that might be construed as aggressive was the most significant obstacle Hannibal could see at the moment. Will rejected his natural reactions, even his emotions, when they were negative. If he did accept Hannibal, he still might not join him. He might not be capable of it simply because of how he had conditioned himself to avoid being seen as dangerous.

Hannibal wanted to work past that. He wanted Will to feel comfortable expressing all of his emotions. Then, he could truly live up to the potential Hannibal could see in him. Will could inspire true awe and terror in others, if he only did it. If he only accepted that he wanted it.

The moon was over the lake, now, and made the water shine like a silver mirror.

It was beautiful out here, and Hannibal knew he appreciated it all the more for having come with Will. It had been quite some time since he had enjoyed being in the woods.

After a few hours, Hannibal saw Will emerge from the tree line near the edge of the lake. He stood up immediately, and saw as Will's head tilted up to track the movement. Hannibal smiled despite himself, and Will woofed softly in reply, starting his casual trot along the shore to reach the cabin and Hannibal.

Hannibal was glad Will was back, and seemed to still be in high spirits. He had not been hurt or bothered.

Hannibal put away his sketchbook and walked to the top of the stairs to meet Will there. Will skipped up the stairs and immediately pressed up against Hannibal, rubbing his face against Hannibal's shoulders and chest. Hannibal smiled and sank his hands into Will's fur and ran it through his fingers.

His heart was beating hard at Will's nearness, and he wondered if Will could tell. Will's senses were heightened when he was in a shifted, and Hannibal had no way of knowing what Will could tell. His scent might change, or Will might be able to hear his heartbeat, for all Hannibal knew.

Will hadn't said anything about it, which made Hannibal more curious.

"Shall we go in, and I can prepare the food?" Hannibal asked.

Will pulled back a bit, grinning that grin of his and making Hannibal's chest flood with warmth again.

Hannibal opened the door and let Will into the cabin and followed. Will curled up next to the table, turned so he would have a full view of the counters and stove while Hannibal cooked.

Hannibal was pleased.

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Chapter Summary

Warning: This chapter contains parts of Will's past that may be painful or triggering.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"What do you say, Doc?" Will asked, putting another bite into his mouth while Hannibal examined his shoulder.

The food was the most delicious thing Will had ever eaten, and he was hungry. He knew his tail was wagging steadily, and he didn't mind at all. If anything, Hannibal deserved to know he was enjoying the food.

"As we suspected, your healing accelerated during the shift. As a doctor, I would suggest you spend as much time as you can in a shifted form," Hannibal said promptly, "and in order to let it breathe, I suggest we leave it unbandaged for some time. It may be tender and sensitive."

Will considered that.

He wouldn't mind spending more time in his shifted forms, especially if it meant he'd be able to get the stitches out sooner. He rarely got to spend time in his shifted forms other than during full moons, when he took the time for himself.

"You may consider going without a shirt for a while, to avoid irritating it," Hannibal said.

Will couldn't stop the furious blush that spread across his face and neck.

He had been able to distance himself from having to take his shirt off for the exams, because it was for only short amounts of time, and served a clinical purpose. He couldn't really do that with the idea of just walking around without a shirt on. Especially around Hannibal.

"If that makes you uncomfortable, you do not have to," Hannibal said, likely noticing Will's reaction, "only wear fabric that will not catch on the stitches or rub harshly against your skin."

That was almost laughable. Will didn't think he owned any shirts made of fabric like that. His go to were flannels, or regular cotton T-shirts. What Hannibal was suggesting would have to be like satin or silk. Will didn't own anything like that.

So he was left with the choice to either let his shoulder be rubbed raw by the fabric of his shirts, or go around without one.

“I’ll have to think about that,” Will said, knowing Hannibal could probably guess every reason for his hesitance and not being able to do anything about that.

Hannibal’s fingers skimmed over the skin of Will’s neck, surprising him and making him flinch back, his ears laying down flat as his tail curled around the leg of his chair. He looked at Hannibal, confused and embarrassed by his own reaction to the touch.

Hannibal smiled apologetically.

“I am sorry, Will,” he said, “I only meant to observe the bruises. They are nearly healed.”

Will swallowed, his throat making a dry clicking sound as he suppressed the tremor that threatened to take over his body.

“Yeah,” he said, his voice soft and rough, “I guess I’ll get to take the sheet off the mirror before we have to leave.”

Hannibal nodded, his eyes never straying from Will’s face. Will knew what he was going to say, what request he was going to make of Will, and Will was afraid. He was frightened, because he thought he would tell the truth. He thought Hannibal could ask, and Will would answer anything.

“Will you tell me about it?” Hannibal asked, matching Will’s volume while making his tone soft and kind.

Will met his eyes, those wine dark and warm eyes that frightened and comforted him all the time. He looked into Hannibal’s eyes and nodded.

“I grew up in Louisiana,” Will said, staring out the window where the sun had begun to rise.

He had finished his food in silence, and they had moved into the room at the front of the cabin, and Will was curled up on the couch with a blanket over his shoulders. His tail was curled tightly around his ankles, and his ears were low near his skull, showing Hannibal that whatever story he was about to relate was not one he relished.

“Down there, when I was still in high school, a lot of people still shared the opinions of wolves that have been prominent for most of history. For most wolves, that wasn’t a problem, because they could hide it for the most part. For me, the only manifest in town, it was different.”

Hannibal listened in silence, knowing any interruption could mean a loss of trust.

“I already told you how it was for me at school. You know just about the worst that happened to me there. The teachers usually didn’t let anything bad happen during school hours, or on

school property. The stalking was the only thing that happened there. Summer after my senior year is when the worst thing happened to me in Louisiana."

Hannibal felt his heart ache for this boy he had not known, this younger Will Graham he never met. Even though he didn't yet know what had happened specifically, just knowing how much pain it had caused him hurt Hannibal deeply.

"I had a job with my dad, fixing up boats and cars mostly. I was saving up for college, and my dad was paying the bills. It was working fine, and I liked the feel of hard work. The only problem was the customers. Especially if they saw me. Like I said, people down there are a bit behind in their ways. If they didn't know I was a manifest, they praised our work and told everyone they knew to go to us when they needed a fix. If they found out…"

Will paused, blinking rapidly. The sun broke over the horizon and illuminated Will's eyes, making them shine brilliantly blue for an instant before he turned his face away. Instead, he looked down at his hands.

"If they found out about me, it was essentially a witch hunt."

Hannibal didn't say anything. He couldn't.

"That was all normal," Will said, a slight hitch in his voice, "stuff I could deal with. I was used to it."

Hannibal felt outraged by this. Will had been treated so poorly all his life, to the point where he had been used to a level of abuse by the time he became an adult.

"What I couldn't deal with, what I wasn't used to, was the first day in July that year, when they decided to take it to another level. That was the day I was kidnapped."

Hannibal was stunned to silence. He had not expected that.

Will chuffed a laugh.

"I guess I was technically an adult, so kidnap isn't exactly the right word. I was abducted. But it feels like the right word. I was still a kid back then. I had seen more of the world than I deserved, but I was still a kid."

Will glanced at Hannibal, and there were tears brimming in his eyes.

They hadn't been that much older than Will. Men who had been boys recently. They had gone to school with Will, and had known what he was. They had recognized his father, seen the family resemblance, and their plan had been born.

They had waited for him. They had watched, and learned the habits of both the Grahams that worked there. Will usually didn't leave until the sun went down, easier to keep to the shadows and out of sight. They found out, and unfortunately used the dark to their advantage as well.

Will heard them coming and ducked his head down, hurrying on his way. He didn't like getting caught by someone who had a vendetta against wolves, and it was a safe bet anyone out at night, following him, had a vendetta against him. If he could just get away, or hide, he wouldn't have to deal with them.

But they had caught him. There had been a few laying in wait, and had used the pursuit to draw his attention away from the scent of the waiting few.

A blow to the back of his head had been enough to stun him, and before he knew what was happening he was collared and muzzled.

Will didn't remember most of what happened after that, usually. It came back to him in nightmares and flashes, but he tried hard to forget. He could remember their voices, telling him that he was dangerous, and needed to be either tamed or neutralized, one way or another.

The collar and muzzle had both locked on, with keys needed to remove them unless you had power tools. They were metal and uncomfortable. Will hadn't been able to shift with them on, or they would have hurt him badly. He had been trapped in his most vulnerable form, and they had plans to make him suffer. Will had clawed at them with his fingernails, succeeding only in digging furrows in his own scalp and face. He had bled before they had even started on the real fun and games.

Will had whined loudly, unable to stop himself, and they had hit him. They had hit him when he made any sound. After a few times, he had forced himself to be silent. His ears had been flat against his skull, and his tail curled around his legs. They had dragged him to a truck and thrown him in the back before hogtying him and driving away.

Will had been sure they would kill him. He was sure they would either kill him or something worse. He had heard about manifest wolves being sold on the black market, because they could shift whenever they wanted and people wanted to either keep them as pets or use them for some kind of covert missions or as bloodhounds. If they were caught, the manifest would be left to catch the fall. An agent and scapegoat all in one.

Because manifest wolves were less than human. They were nothing but an animal pretending to be a person. So it was ethical to do anything to them.

Even kill them, depending on where you lived.

And Will lived in the deep south, where people killed each other over air conditioners and shrimp nets. He had every reason to fear for his life.

"They didn't kill me," Will said, his voice small now, almost fearful as if they were still a danger to him, "but they made me feel like it wouldn't be so bad if they did. I had marks from that collar and muzzle for months after. I was afraid to shift. I stopped shifting, even for full moon nights, for a long time after that. I tried not to be a Manifest. I wore hats and hid my tail, trying to be *normal* . I was afraid to let anyone know what I am."

Hannibal's heart was broken for Will. He hadn't thought anyone was really that bad, naively. He had thought they lived in a more rational time than that. He hadn't realized what Will had gone through. What he had survived to get to this point in his life.

If Hannibal could, he would give Will his power back, and make sure he never felt afraid again.

"Dad moved us as soon as he could, but it was bad. Business had been alright for a while there, and hauling everything up to leave was a blow. I started getting sick a lot. Colds and the flu and all that usually. Easy stuff. I was angry all the time, and I had headaches. It was because I wasn't shifting. I was fighting my own nature. I only got better after I started shifting again. But I almost never went out where I could be seen if I was shifted."

Will was starting to sound angry, now, rather than sad and frightened. Hannibal was glad, because it meant Will didn't feel defeated.

"I don't always remember everything they did to me, even if I try to," Will admitted, "but I remember the aftermath. They wrecked my life for years. I almost gave up on college just because I was afraid. I'm lucky I went to a school in an area where people are like that in a lower percentage."

Hannibal was glad Will had been working past this. There were many who wouldn't have recovered from it, not because they were weak, but because they had been strong for longer than they should have been forced to. Will had been strong far longer than he should have needed to be, but Hannibal was glad it had gotten them here.

"The worst part is that I knew they were enjoying it, the entire time," Will said, his tone bitter, "I could feel it. They weren't enjoying it just because of what I am, they would have enjoyed doing that to anyone. They just justified their actions because they knew no one would get after them for doing those things to a Manifest."

Will turned and looked at Hannibal for the first time since he had started the tale. His expression was defiant and firm, and Hannibal was in love with him.

"Now you know the worst of it, doctor Lecter," Will said, "are you going to tell me about your sister, or will it hurt you too much to talk about it?"

Hannibal was stunned into silence. He hadn't known Will knew anything about Mischa's existence, though he supposed he shouldn't have been all that surprised. He had seen how keen Will's insight was, and they had spent much time together now. It made sense that Will had picked up on a few things Hannibal had been concealing from everyone else in his life.

"If you would like," Hannibal agreed, wondering if he would be able to talk about it with Will without showing things he didn't yet want to reveal.

Chapter End Notes

Yo! I'm back from the annual hiatus! Did I write a bunch of chapters for all of my WIPs while I was gone so now I can smother all my readers in gifts to show my affection? No.

Sorry. Updates are going to be as irregular as they used to be. I got many things done over the hiatus, but barely any of it was fics I've actually started posting. If you must know, it's far too likely I will have over 100 WIPs by the end of the year, meaning fics I've started writing and not yet finished (I'm a crazy person). That includes the current ones, of which there are only about 5-7. I don't remember and can't be bothered to check because I'm lazy. So that's what I was working on. Not finishing anything, but merely adding to my list of projects.

Enjoy. <3

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Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will watched Hannibal as he talked. He felt bad for asking Hannibal to relive something that was so painful for him, solely because he didn't want to be the only one who was vulnerable.

Hannibal had retreated inside himself the moment he began telling Will about the hunting lodge in his birth country. Will wasn't sure if it was because he was lost in his past or because he was running from it.

Near the end of the story, Will could see that Hannibal was leaving some details out. He didn't mind, knowing his own story had been far from complete, but it did make him curious. He wondered what Hannibal would feel the need to hide from him.

Because Will hadn't been hiding things from Hannibal. The missing parts of his story were the parts he honestly didn't remember. That was the difference.

When Hannibal finished, staring at the patch of sunlight that had slowly been growing on the rug as the day brightened, Will wanted to comfort him. He wished there was something he could do to make him feel better.

But Hannibal was clearly less affected by his experience than Will still was. He had worked past it, somehow, so he probably didn't need comfort the way Will did. Maybe it was just enough that he was telling someone, and Will was listening.

"I think we should take it slow today," Will said hesitantly, "take it easy. We should just rest. We've both had a long night, and a bit of a trying morning. I'm sorry for all this."

Hannibal smiled wryly.

"I am the one who asked you to relive your traumatic past. After we both had a long night. Thank you for trusting me with such an intimate part of yourself."

Will returned the smile, feeling better that Hannibal wasn't upset with him. Not that he had really expected him to be. But he hadn't been sure.

"Thank you for telling me about Mischa. I wasn't sure you'd be comfortable telling me, but I'm glad you did."

Hannibal looked at Will, and there was a tenderness to his eyes that made Will's face warm slightly. He was suddenly aware of how near they were. During one of the stories, they had shifted closer together on the couch. Will hadn't even noticed.

Hannibal's hand found its way into Will's hair, and began combing along his scalp. Will instantly relaxed more, his eyes falling shut as he heard his tail thumping against the cushions of the couch.

Hannibal huffed a soft laugh.

“It pleases me that I can offer you this small comfort,” he said.

Will opened his eyes, and saw that it was true. Furthermore, Hannibal was gaining comfort from it as well. Will was able to comfort Hannibal by allowing him to comfort him. It made a warm glow rise in his chest, and he was delighted.

Will felt better about his past, just for having told someone about it. After his father had died, Will hadn’t had anyone who knew, and he never felt comfortable telling anyone about it. Hannibal made him feel safe, and hadn’t reacted with disgust when he heard how Will had been effected by it all for so long. Will had often felt he should have already healed, or gotten over it, and he was ashamed he still reacted to his memories.

But Hannibal made Will feel safe, and unjudged.

Will had an idea, his ears instantly perking up.

“Hold up,” he said, kicking his legs off the couch and standing up, “I’ll be right back.”

Hannibal dropped his hand onto the back of the couch, looking at Will inquisitively. He seemed slightly concerned, but Will just smiled and headed to his room with the blanket still draped over his shoulders.

Once Will was in his room and out of sight, he threw the blanket onto the bed and kicked off the rest of his clothes. He shifted into his domestic form and headed back out. Hannibal had said it would be good for him to spend more time shifted, and this was a way to kill two birds with one stone. He just hoped Hannibal would understand it.

Hannibal was nearly speechless when Will reemerged in the form of a dog. He had not expected that.

Will padded over and put his front paws on the couch, looking to Hannibal for permission. Hannibal nodded, unsure what to expect from Will next.

Will hopped up onto the couch and curled up into Hannibal’s side, pressing his strong, soft body against Hannibal. He was warm, and somehow felt right, there. As if Will was supposed to sit with Hannibal that way.

After a moment, Hannibal let his hand come to rest in the fur on the back of Will’s neck. Will let out a soft, contented huff of air and shifted so his head was laying in Hannibal’s lap. Hannibal began to stroke his hand through Will’s fur, and Will closed his eyes.

Will must have been able to tell how the contact had been helping Hannibal. Will had seen that Hannibal needed this just as much, if not more than he did. Will was offering Hannibal the chance to take comfort for himself, through this offering of contact. Will would not usually have done something so familiar and intimate with anyone. Hannibal knew the

significance of this. Will was making himself vulnerable, and letting himself get close to Hannibal.

They sat there, on the couch in the room that was slowly warming with sunlight, for a long while. After some time, Hannibal noticed that Will's tail had stopped thumping against the couch, and his ears were flicking sporadically. He was asleep. He was dreaming.

Hannibal smiled to himself, shifting slightly to make himself more comfortable on the couch. He didn't intend to wake Will. If Will was having a dream that wasn't a nightmare, Hannibal wanted to allow it to run uninterrupted.

Hannibal managed to move into a good position, and closed his eyes as well. He wouldn't admit it to Will, but he was jealously covetous of the privilege to touch Will. He had said anyone might be able to offer this comfort to Will, because he was concerned about frightening Will, but he would be sorely tempted to kill anyone who tried. This was something he wanted to keep for himself.

Hannibal fell asleep with Will's fur between his fingers, the sound of his even breathing, and the smell of him in his lungs.

Will woke up slowly, blinking in the warm sunlight. His senses were filled with Hannibal, and he had slept without a hint of a nightmare for the first time in a long time. Hannibal had moved after Will had fallen asleep, and now Will was entirely on top of him. His head was laying on Hannibal's chest, and Hannibal's feet were up on the couch so his legs were under Will.

Will wondered if that was uncomfortable for him, but since Hannibal was still asleep, he guessed it wasn't too bad.

Hannibal was beautiful. He was so soft and vulnerable while he was sleeping, and the sun was caressing his hair and turning it into strands of spun gold. His pupils were moving beneath his eyelids, and Will wondered what he might be dreaming about.

Will hadn't meant to fall asleep, honestly. He hadn't realized how tired he was until he was curled up on the couch next to Hannibal. The sensation of Hannibal's fingers combing through his fur had lulled him right to sleep, and Will had felt safe.

Will wished he wasn't falling in love with Hannibal. It was bound to make things complicated. More complicated. And he knew it would bring a fresh bounty of judgment and discrimination on them both.

He just couldn't win.

If Will seemed in any way to have more power than Hannibal in the relationship, people would take it as a Manifest being aggressive. If the reverse appeared to be true, it would support that stupid essay that claimed wolves wanted to submit to authority. He was either the villain or a pet. No matter what he did.

Not that this was a relationship. Will thought Hannibal felt the same way, had been carefully collecting small bits of evidence to support it, but he wasn't sure. And Hannibal might not want to act on his feelings, anyway. He might see the consequences of that decision and come to the conclusion it simply wasn't worth it.

So it was foolish to even be worried about something that wasn't happening, and might not happen.

But Will couldn't help it. He wanted Hannibal in a way he had never wanted anyone else. He wanted to see him like this every day, wake up with the scent of Hannibal in his lungs, make Hannibal laugh in that unguarded way he rarely showed. Will wanted to kiss him and be held and loved. He wanted these things despite knowing it was a bad idea, and despite knowing it might not even be an option for him.

That kind of thing was almost never an option for him.

Hannibal stirred, and Will pretended to still be asleep. He felt awkward, just laying on top of Hannibal while the man was asleep. It would be better to let Hannibal wake him up, or continue to lay there for some time longer. Either way. Will liked both ideas.

The hand returned to comb through the fur at the back of Will's neck, and he sighed happily. It was something he could get away with while pretending to be asleep. Hannibal's touch was soothing and good, and Will wished it would never go away.

"I suppose I should wake you and put some food into the both of us," Hannibal mumbled, making Will feel a little bad for the act now. It was different when Hannibal was talking, thinking he wasn't being heard. It felt like eavesdropping. Hannibal's pulse quickened a bit, and Will couldn't believe himself.

"The problem is that I don't wish you to move," Hannibal continued softly, "I would lay here with you forever if I could. You are such a beautiful creature. I wish I could convince you to be mine."

Will could hear Hannibal's heart beating rapidly, and he felt it under his jaw.

If only Hannibal knew. If only he knew what Will knew. If he knew Will was listening, would he say such a thing? Will didn't know. But Will's heart ached with his want, now.

Hannibal shifted and pressed a kiss to the tip of Will's nose. Will almost died with happiness, but managed to keep himself calm enough to pretend to wake slowly when Hannibal began trying to rouse him.

"I think it's about time for us to eat something," Hannibal said, all professionalism now, "and you must take your medication. I would also like to take your temperature and take a look at your stitches. I am curious to see their progress since you have shifted again."

Will climbed off the couch, mourning the loss of solid warmth Hannibal had provided. He yawned and stretched, feeling his vertebrae popping in a satisfying way. He shook himself and headed to his bedroom to shift and dress.

Hannibal brushed himself off, smiling distractedly as he made his way to his own room. Presumably to change and prepare for the day they had nearly slept away.

Chapter End Notes

If I can make it only a couple weeks, now, without getting four more ideas for fics, I won't reach 100 WIPs. That would be a small miracle, and I'm hoping for it. I just might be able to finish a few things in that case.
Happy holidays.

41

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal tried to settle his pounding heart. Waking up with Will that way had been a test of his resolve stronger than he had expected. Will had been so calm and solid, his heart thrumming behind his ribs and his breath warming the skin of Hannibal's neck and jaw.

He had made the slight risk of indulging himself with a kiss to Will's nose. If Will had woken, then, and caught Hannibal in the act, he wasn't sure what would have happened.

Hannibal was edging ever closer to the cliff, and once he fell there would be no going back. He was preparing for the fall as well as he could, but Will would really be the only one to decide what would happen.

For now, Hannibal had to feed them both, and monitor Will's condition. It wouldn't do to neglect him even the slightest bit right now.

Hannibal wanted to be his everything.

Hannibal dressed, deciding on impulse to wear something much more casual than he normally would. He even forewent shoes, wanting to make Will comfortable. He hoped it wouldn't do just the opposite. He thought it might encourage Will to be more comfortable not wearing a shirt, though he knew that would be a constant temptation all on its own. It would really be the easiest for Will.

Hannibal padded out barefoot to the kitchen and began to take out ingredients for their late breakfast.

He hoped they would be able to fix their sleep schedules after the previous night. He thought they wouldn't have much of a problem, as Will was used to such nighttime activities and he was often a creature of the night as well. What a pair they made. Both monsters in the eyes of society.

Hannibal turned and saw Will by the table. He hadn't heard him come in, but he smiled.

"You're humming."

Hannibal stopped. He hadn't noticed, but now he heard it. He had been humming to himself. A song Mischa had loved.

Hannibal didn't sing. He hadn't been blessed with a good voice for it, and he felt his other skills vastly compensated for that lack. He hadn't sung since Mischa had been killed. He hadn't even hummed a tune, as far as he could remember.

"I suppose I am," he said, smiling nervously to Will, "I hadn't noticed. Any requests for breakfast?"

Will smiled.

“I’m sure whatever you make will be better than what I can think up,” he said, stepping closer, but leaving a distance between them, possibly for Hannibal’s comfort, “do you need any help?”

Hannibal smoothed his expression into something more pleasant, holding out his hand to Will.

As if they had done it a million times before, Will stepped forward and placed his hand into Hannibal’s and the tension dissipated immediately. Hannibal placed Will at the counter and gave him a few things to cut as he prepared the stove. Hannibal allowed his hand to glide over the small of Will’s back, then moved to the stove to work on his part.

They were close to each other, the kitchen here much smaller than the one in Hannibal’s home, but Hannibal enjoyed the nearness. He could smell the freshness of Will, and the warmth. He felt better with Will there.

And if his swishing tail was any indication, Will felt the same.

Hannibal’s arm was across the back of the couch, his hand up and gently petting through Will’s hair. It was driving Will nearly crazy. The lazy, casual intimacy they were cultivating between them. Will was sure he would break at any moment and do something he couldn’t take back.

Hannibal was outwardly as calm as ever, though whenever they did anything like this Will heard his pulse quicken. Will hoped he was starting to understand why that was, but he was afraid to be wrong about it.

“It is fascinating to me to witness the way your dual natures interact and combine,” Hannibal said.

Will’s ears perked up and he closed his book. He didn’t turn his head because he didn’t want to stop Hannibal from continuing what he was doing. But this sounded like a conversation worth having.

“How so?” he asked.

“This, for instance,” Hannibal replied, rubbing gently at one of Will’s ears in a way that nearly made Will’s toes curl, “I would not have originally expected it to be an activity with so much influence on your mood. I wonder what parts of your canine nature are more prominent compared to the others.”

Will huffed softly. He was honestly surprised at Hannibal for this.

“This,” Will said, pointing to where Hannibal’s hand still sat in his hair, “is not a canine exclusive behavior.”

Hannibal's hand stilled, but didn't fall away from Will's head. Will turned, then, and found him considering this pensively.

"People like to be touched and petted just as much as dogs," Will continued, "it's just not as common to do. Probably because people want to separate themselves from what they consider dumb animals."

Hannibal tipped his head.

"You are no dumb animal, Will," he said.

Will turned further toward Hannibal, chuffing and shaking his head. He set aside the book, instantly forgetting all about it.

"I'm not," he agreed, "But that's not my point."

Then, Will decided to do something impulsive.

"I'll show you."

Before Hannibal could respond, and before Will could think better of it, Will lifted both of his own hands and placed them in Hannibal's hair. Hannibal stilled completely, his eyes wide in surprise, but didn't object or pull away. After a moment without Hannibal reacting adversely, Will began to run his fingers through Hannibal's hair the way he had been doing for Will.

Hannibal's mouth dropped open slightly, and Will couldn't help but smile. He heard Hannibal's breath catch, and his heart beat faster, and saw his pupils blow wide. All things that further encouraged Will.

When Will's nails scratched gently over Hannibal's scalp, his eyes slid shut and a soft sigh escaped his parted lips.

Will did another impulsive thing, then.

Hannibal was beautiful this way, his body relaxing under Will's touch.

So Will leaned in and kissed him.

It was reckless, and dangerous, but Will kissed Hannibal.

Immediately, Hannibal's entire body tensed. Will moved to pull away, sure he had made a mistake, but suddenly Hannibal's hands were there. One on his back, pulling him closer, and the other at the nape of his neck to seal their mouths together.

And Hannibal kissed him back.

Will's tail was thumping wildly, and he would normally have been embarrassed about it, but just then he was too focused on the way Hannibal seemed set to devour him entirely. Hannibal kissed him like a starving man, and Will gave back with the same fervor. He wasn't

even thinking, worrying over what might happen because of this. His mind was clear of everything but one word.

Mine.

It repeated in his head, urging him to lay claim to Hannibal, the object of his desire and jealousy.

They parted for breath, both gasping and flushed.

“Will Graham,” Hannibal said, like a prayer, “You are so beautiful. Every day has been a test of my control.”

Will smiled, still trying to catch his breath. His heart felt like it was fit to escape his body any minute at the rate it was running.

“I could say the same thing,” he managed, “I didn’t know if you felt the way I did.”

Hannibal smiled and pulled Will into another kiss. Will was nearly in Hannibal’s lap at this point, but neither of them really cared to change positions. If anything, Will wanted to get closer.

“I guess we’ll have to keep this a secret, won’t we?” Will asked.

Hannibal frowned. He had no desire to hide this from anyone. He wanted everyone to know Will had chosen him, and that Hannibal had been deemed worthy by someone like Will. He wanted to take Will everywhere with him, just so they could be seen together.

Hannibal hummed in disagreement, continuing to card his fingers through Will’s hair.

Will sat up and met Hannibal’s eyes. His own eyes were bright and serious.

“You’re my employer, Hannibal,” he said, “It won’t look good. Not to mention, me being a manifest. The things people will say.”

Hannibal’s fingers reflexively tightened in Will’s hair, wanting to pull, then relaxed again.

“I do not care what they may or may not say,” he said frankly.

“Damn it, Hannibal,” Will said, sitting up and scowling at him, “Not everything is about you. I know you don’t care about hurting your practice. You’ve made that clear already. I know you don’t care if you set the whole world on fire to show you aren’t prejudiced against me for what I am. I know all of that, and you’ll never know how much that means to me.”

Will took a breath, closing his eyes as he seemed to prepare himself for what he had to say next.

“Have you read that essay by Bruce Reeves?” he asked.

The name rang a distant bell, though Hannibal couldn't immediately recall what the essay had been about. If he had read it, it had been only in passing, and long ago. He thought it more likely he had not read it.

Will didn't wait for Hannibal to say as much.

"He makes all these assertions about Wolves. Manifests, in particular. He says they are naturally predisposed to submissive behavior. He says wolves look for a figure in authority and/or power, and instinctively imprint on them. He claims wolves like to be overpowered or controlled by someone above them. He makes a great argument for the use of collars and muzzles. He even says we like them."

Hannibal was horrified.

"So," Will continued, keeping Hannibal's attention focused, "this being a prominent bit of reading for anyone interested in Manifest wolves, what do you expect people will think if they find out about this?"

Hannibal mentally berated himself.

Of course Will hadn't been worried about Hannibal's reputation or social standing. He had been afraid of ruining everything he had been working his entire life to build. Will had done everything within his power to make himself independent as an individual. If people believed he had fallen victim to something like this theory he described, all that would be lost. No matter what he has done, Will's world could be brought down by this senseless idea.

Hannibal was so selfish for not having seen it.

"You want us to keep it a secret," Hannibal concluded.

Will sighed and rested his head on Hannibal's chest. His ears were flat against his hair and a soft whine escaped him.

"No," he whispered, "I don't. Because the awful truth of it is I want to rub you in their smug faces. I want to show everyone I was good enough to get you. That even me, a stupid Manifest wolf with no friends and no social skills, with a broken brain that gets too close to the minds of killers, has some value that someone like you recognized."

Hannibal wanted to object. The way Will had just spoken about himself made Hannibal angry. Someone had made him feel that way.

But Will didn't stop to ask Hannibal's opinion.

"I want them to see that someone, anyone, especially someone like you, wants anything to do with me. That you would be seen with me in public. That you would be proud to be with me. I want that so much. But they wouldn't see you as mine. They would see me as yours."

Hannibal understood. At least, as far as he could. He would never know exactly what Will was experiencing, but now he knew part of what he was facing.

Hannibal held Will, promising himself he would do something to let Will be seen as he wanted to be seen. He would do something so no one would ever think Will was weak or submissive. So they would see how strong and dangerous Will was. That he was dangerous, but kind enough to control himself.

Hannibal would make them see. Will was not someone to underestimate.

“Then we can conceal it,” Hannibal said, though it was bitter in his mouth, “I will do it for you. Because you ask it.”

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, so I have started five new ideas since I last updated. My WIP count is over 100. *cries* I was so close. But hopefully I'll have a few one shots to post soon, and that might whittle it down again. We'll see.

I hope you liked this chapter. We finally got some cute relationship scenes out of it. That pining is over. At least for now.
Thanks for reading <3 <3

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Will came out after taking a shower, rubbing a towel through his his hair and drying his ears. He hadn't put a shirt on yet, and he was actually considering not doing so. He was feeling a little more confident around Hannibal, now.

But where was he?

Hannibal wasn't in the main part of the cabin, or in his room. He wasn't in the kitchen. Will didn't know where he was, and now the whole place smelled like both of them.

Will sniffed around, looking for a fresh trail, and eventually found his way to the back deck. Hannibal was sitting there, in one of the wicker rocking chairs, with a laptop opened on his legs. His brow was furrowed, and he was clearly concentrated on whatever was on the screen

"What are you reading?" Will asked, walking over in his bare feet.

Hannibal sat back and offered a displeased smile to Will.

"I'm afraid it's something you need to know, yet I don't wish to tell you," he said.

Will frowned and pulled the towel down around his neck. He dropped his hand to the back of Hannibal's neck and gently carded his fingers through the hair at the nape.

"What happened this time?" he asked.

Hannibal sighed.

"Come here, Širdelė," he said, setting the laptop aside and taking Will's hand to pull him around.

Will went, and Hannibal pulled him down into his lap. Will flushed, not sure how to behave in this situation. He had never been in a relationship that allowed for this kind of exploration in gestures of affection. He hadn't even thought about it in this context before.

Hannibal hooked one arm around Will's back, his hand coming to rest against his bare side and sending a shiver through him. It wasn't actually bad, and Will liked it. Hannibal set his chin on Will's shoulder, letting out a soft sigh that warmed the side of Will's neck.

"Is this alright?" Hannibal asked softly.

Will nodded, not sure he trusted his voice just then.

They sat that way for a moment, each of them adjusting to this position. Will could hear Hannibal's pulse slowing, and he felt less tense. Hannibal was gaining comfort from this.

Will liked it more after realizing that.

“Alright,” Hannibal said, pulling the laptop onto Will’s lap and showing him what he had been reading before, “I am sorry about this, Will.”

Will looked, and the first thing he noticed was the picture. He immediately felt the blood drain from his face and his skin went cold.

It had been taken through the blinds of his apartment window. He lived on the ground level, and he usually left the blinds open a crack so natural light would stream in. He liked the beams of light that danced with dust motes.

But someone had been watching them after they left the hospital.

The picture was of Will and Hannibal. Hannibal was holding Will, his hand in Will’s hair. Will had been crying in the moment, soaking Hannibal’s shirt in tears of guilt and fear, but you couldn’t tell from the picture. You could see the side of Hannibal’s face, and the top of Will’s head, his dark ears poking up over Hannibal’s shoulder. His tail was also visible, embarrassingly curled around Hannibal’s leg as if clinging to him the way Will was clinging to Hannibal’s jacket in the same moment.

This was bad. It was so bad.

Will quickly scanned the article, horrified by what he read.

The author was cited as Freddie Lounds, and this was on a site called tattlecrime.com. Will didn’t recognize the name, but he realized it was probably the same journalist who had put Will’s picture on the internet for Rebecca Smith to find. She was the reason Will had been targeted by the killer. Now, she was speculating about Hannibal being in a relationship with his assistant, who was a Manifest wolf, and they were both helping the FBI.

The fact that they were technically in a relationship now was irrelevant. They hadn’t been at the time the picture had been taken, and it wasn’t anyone’s damn business.

Will felt rage threatening to build in his chest, and his teeth began to shift, becoming sharper. His claws fought to come out.

“Is this the same journalist from before?” he asked, his voice low and growling.

“Yes,” Hannibal answered, understanding what Will meant, “she is the one who took the picture of you at the first crime scene.”

Will carefully put the laptop back onto the table by the chair, not wanting to damage it out of anger. He chewed on his tongue, trying to keep himself from acting on his anger.

—

“Will,” Hannibal said, wanting to calm him while simultaneously wanting to see him finally act on the rage he could see building. Will was a glorious creature, and Hannibal was enthralled by the potential for violence he saw there. “I am sorry.”

Will turned to him, pinning Hannibal in place with icy blue eyes. He bared his teeth, and Hannibal could see they were sharp, closer to canine than usual.

“Don’t apologize for something that isn’t your fault,” Will said, and Hannibal felt a thrill build in his spine at the growl in Will’s voice, “would you have acted differently if you knew this would happen?”

Hannibal had no choice but to tell the truth. He felt a lie would be sniffed out as easily as Will had smelled the intruder in his apartment.

“No.”

Will grabbed Hannibal’s face, his nails digging into his jaw like claws, and pulled him into a kiss. Hannibal tasted blood, and realized Will had been biting his tongue. Perhaps he did that in order to restrain his violent urges.

While Hannibal couldn’t abide by the thought of Will hurting himself, the thought of Will’s blood in his mouth made him groan softly. He pulled Will tighter to him, and Will’s tail began to swish back and forth. His grip on Hannibal’s face didn’t lessen any, though, and he licked into Hannibal’s mouth with his damaged tongue.

“Exactly. If I’m going to work through my problems, then you aren’t allowed to start having any. I’ll try not to repress my anger, but you aren’t allowed to take the blame for everything and apologize for other people. Quid pro quo.”

Hannibal agreed, promising with every breath between kissing Will. He would do anything to see more of this magnificent creature, to taste the evidence of his anger on his tongue, to hear the growl in his voice. Hannibal wanted every part of Will, and he would keep him.

—

“So, what are we going to do about Freddie Lounds?” Will asked, not sure he wanted to deal with this, but knowing they had to talk about it.

Hannibal hummed, absently twirling his fingers through Will’s hair.

“What would you like to do about her?” he asked.

Will stared at Hannibal. He wasn’t sure if Hannibal was asking what he thought they should do, or what he wanted to do. Those were entirely different things. And Will only knew the answer to one of them.

“What are you asking?” Will asked, afraid of what Hannibal might say.

Hannibal hummed again, as if this was the most natural kind of conversation they could be having while lying in bed together. He took one of Will’s ears between his fingers and rubbed it absently.

“I am asking what you would like to do,” he said, “whether that be what you believe reasonable or not. From your desire we can then make a reasonable plan, but you have

promised to be honest with yourself, and I am trying to help you with that."

Will closed his eyes, taking in a deep breath. He filled his lungs with the smell of Hannibal, and he felt safe. Hannibal made him feel safe, and Will wasn't worried about what Hannibal might think about his answer.

"I would like," Will said carefully, opening his eyes and meeting Hannibal's gaze, "to tear her throat out with my teeth. I would like to feel her bones crush in my jaws. I would like to kill her in the most painful way I can, and taste her blood on my tongue."

Hannibal swallowed, and his heart sped up. Will's ears fell flat against his skull, sure he had just frightened the man. He looked down at his hands, pulling away from Hannibal and cursing himself. He shouldn't have made himself that comfortable like that. He should have known better.

Hannibal wasn't like him.

"What do you suggest we do instead?" Hannibal asked, and Will didn't hear even the slightest note of fear in his voice.

Will looked back up, finding Hannibal looking at him warmly, not frightened in the slightest.

"We cannot very well kill Miss Lounds, at least not at this juncture," Hannibal continued, his eyes sparkling with humor, "so I think it prudent to find something a bit more legal to do in place of that."

Will sighed, feeling the stress he had just built up seep back out of his muscles. He laughed softly. He had been worried over nothing. He should have known. Hannibal hadn't judged him for anything yet.

"I don't know," he said, "I don't suppose we can sue her for defamation or something?"

Hannibal smiled.

"Considering all factors, I don't think that would be entirely successful," he answered, "but that by no means implies we cannot take some legal action."

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Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Precisely. This is not the first time Miss Lounds has intruded on Will's privacy, and you are aware of it. If you would like either of us to feel comfortable helping with a case again, we will need this."

Hannibal allowed a moment of silence as Jack thought about it. All he wanted from Jack was his support, because it would smooth the way. He was confident he could get what he wanted without Jack's help, but the support of the FBI would expedite the process.

"She has good lawyers," Jack warned, "Most people don't win, and trust me, there have been plenty. Freddie Lounds is lucky she can go anywhere without breaking a restraining order."

Hannibal nodded to himself, sure that was true. That was why things would be easier if Jack played along.

"That is why I called," Hannibal said, "I doubt any of the others had the advantage of being consultants for the FBI."

Jack huffed his agreement.

"Just out of curiosity, is Lounds right?" he asked, "Does this new article hit too close to home?"

Hannibal bristled, but kept his tone level.

"As it so happens, Freddie Lounds fabricated every word of that refuse," he said, "her article does not provide the context of the picture, being that Will had just been through a highly traumatizing experience, during which he was nearly killed along with several others."

Jack didn't reply right away, further irking Hannibal. He had never found Jack to be as annoying as he did now.

"I only wondered, because it seems to me you two have a very strange relationship for a doctor and his assistant."

Hannibal refused to roll his eyes, though for the first time he could recall it was a real temptation.

"Will and I are friends, Agent Crawford. I am not the type to hide a relationship.

That, at least, was true, and Jack appeared to know it.

"Alright, but I want you to really look at that file while you're there. Maybe get some of Will's ideas as well. I can help you with Lounds, but I want this in return. The Ripper needs

to be a priority."

Hannibal smiled to himself. That was exactly what he had been hoping for, but he wouldn't let Jack know that.

"I will look, and do everything I can. But I will not ask Will to look at it. He was not well while working on your case, and I believe it was detrimental to him both mentally and physically. If he is feeling better after we return, I will not stand in his way if he wishes to help you again, but I will not interrupt this time he is taking to rest and heal in order to have him risk his health further. I hope you understand."

Jack sighed.

"Fine. Just get back to me as soon as you can."

Jack hung up the phone.

Rude.

Hannibal sighed softly and shook his head. He was going to get what he wanted from Jack, but he wasn't pleased with the man. He was at least glad they were away from Jack and his team for a few more days. He had time to accomplish what he had set out to.

Things were certainly going his way so far.

But there was something that worried Hannibal.

He had told Will about his past, and then been caught humming. Will was inspiring him to be vulnerable and open in ways he hadn't expected. It was a dangerous thing, especially before Will started to work on the Ripper case. He might make connections before either of them were ready.

Hannibal felt strange in his own skin in a way he never had before. What he had with Will was already far more intimate than any relationship he'd had, and there was so much yet to learn. He was pulled to Will, wanting to shed his persona and be with Will in complete honesty, but another part of him shrank away at the idea, afraid for the first time of being hurt.

Will could hurt him, Hannibal knew. He had given Will that power before he had decided exactly what shape he wanted this relationship to take. Maybe even while sitting in the office and interviewing the man to be his assistant.

Had his obsession been that immediate? Had he merely been foolish to think it had started as casual interest and grown from there? If Hannibal had been wrong about that, what else might he be overlooking to suit his own personal desires?

Hannibal brought the file onto the back deck and set himself up at the table. Will was fishing on the lake, and Hannibal would be able to watch him from there.

Hannibal saw Will's ear flick as the door closed, and Will looked up at him. Hannibal smiled, and Will shyly returned it, quickly ducking his head back to his task, though his tail had begun to swish behind him.

Hannibal felt a dull ache in his chest. A part of him wanted to leave everything behind and stay here with Will. Preserve this strange, domestic comfort as if in amber. He could do it. He could stop being the Ripper, stop being Doctor Lecter. All he would have to be was Will's.

But it would still be a lie. He felt that in his chest, and it was the source of the ache. He would only be lying, and there would be so many things Will would never know. Hannibal would never get the chance to see him in his complete, violent glory.

And it would be impossible to sustain. Hannibal would break eventually. Whether it be years or longer down the road, he would not always be satisfied with this soft version of Will. He was drawn by the darkness and potential in Will, and wouldn't be truly satisfied until they were realized.

With a soft sigh, Hannibal sat in the chair and opened the file, being greeted by the sight of his most recent display.

He wondered if Will would recognize her.

—

"What are you reading?" Will asked, stepping out onto the deck after cleaning and storing the fish he had caught.

It looked suspiciously like a case file, and Will got the feeling he was out to hear that Agent Crawford had continued to be difficult.

Hannibal sighed softly.

"A condition of an agreement to guarantee you a peaceful convalescence," he confessed.

Will huffed,

"And here I thought we were both taking a break," he said, "do you want me to take a look?"

Hannibal tipped his head back to look up at Will. There were a few emotions battling for dominance of his features, and Will wanted to smooth his worries away.

"I would not want to interrupt your rest," he said, "I have taken this on to give you a break from the work you found damaging."

Will smiled and pressed a kiss to Hannibal's lips. He felt his heart jump in his chest, and his mind tried to convince him everything had been a dream and he wasn't really allowed this. The answering rise in Hannibal's pulse soothed his nerves, along with the pleased hum the man gave.

“I found it damaging because of the pressure I was under,” Will told Hannibal, “Jack was demanding answers I didn’t have yet, while I was trying to work through the struggle of the process I had to undergo. Here, with you, I don’t feel pressured, and you are free to help me as you promised to do.”

Hannibal stared up at Will, his eyes shining with warmth. Will wanted to claw open his ribcage and crawl inside, taking the place of his heart and lungs. At the thought of it, he felt his claws wanting to come out.

“Not to mention,” he continued, holding back the impulse, “I had encephalitis. That’s the kind of thing that makes a lot of things more difficult. I feel better now, and I feel safe.”

Hannibal took Will’s hand and pressed a kiss to the inside of his wrist.

“If you truly want to help with this, I am powerless to deny you,” he said, “but I warn you, it is more intense than the last case.”

Will felt a rush of determination, wanting to show Hannibal he could do this without losing his mind. Without the encephalitis, he could do it without having any problems. He wanted to prove that to Hannibal.

“Let me look,” he said.

Hannibal handed the file to Will. It was surprisingly thick.

Will leaned against the table and flipped the file open.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter includes the description of the scene, and Will's reaction to it. ;)

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Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal watched intently as Will opened the file and set his eyes on the scene for the first time. Will's reaction would be important to note, and Hannibal didn't want to miss one detail.

Will's breath hitched, and the next moment his pupils blew wide, as if trying to eclipse the color. Hannibal was enthralled, and felt a rush of victory, validated by Will's reaction.

"It's Martha Meyers," Will said, as if he couldn't quite believe it.

Hannibal hadn't expected Will to recognize her, but he was pleased he did.

"Do you know her?" Hannibal asked, frowning.

Will shook his head, shuffling through to the rest of the pictures, almost as if hungry to see more.

"I never met her. I just know of her. She has quite the reputation for her stance on Manifest Wolves. She's a shameless supporter of Bruce Reeves and his stances. You should read some of her posts."

Will paled slightly and swallowed, glancing at Hannibal.

"Actually, no, you shouldn't," he said quickly, "just trust me."

Hannibal hid his amusement. Will was afraid Hannibal might be influenced by the outlandish beliefs of these individuals. Hannibal would have been offended, but he understood how insecure Will was, and that he had been given reason to mistrust good things in his life. He was afraid of losing Hannibal now that he had him.

Hannibal had read plenty of Martha's ideas, and that was why she had died. Will wouldn't be losing him anytime soon.

"What do you see in this scene, Will?" he asked.

Will took a long breath.

"I recognize the signature. This isn't a new case. This is the Chesapeake Ripper."

Hannibal was enchanted.

"You're familiar with the killer, then," he said.

Will nodded, flipping through to see lab results and investigation reports.

“You saw my transcripts. I took courses in criminal psychology and forensics. I guess the professors thought it might help to get every person on it they could. They probably hoped one of us would have a breakthrough and they could take credit for it. We weren’t given this many details, obviously, but enough for me to notice some patterns.”

Hannibal was fascinated, and even more impressed by Will than he had been before. It was a physical struggle to keep himself from pulling Will into his lap and kissing him senseless.

“What patterns do you see?” he asked.

Hannibal was sure his voice was not even, but luckily Will seemed fixed on the file, not noticing.

“Elegance,” he said, making Hannibal’s heart soar, “The Ripper doesn’t kill for violence’s sake. They create art from their destruction. Meaning.”

Hannibal nodded.

“What meaning did they give to this woman’s death?” he asked, hardly daring to hope.

Will closed his eyes, and Hannibal felt his heart beating in his chest. He had been waiting for this.

“The Ripper has made something beautiful out of someone who had worked hard to become ugly, while exposing her for the kind of person she was. She was prejudiced and rude, promoting dangerous yet widely held beliefs. It’s strange, because the Ripper is not a vigilante. They don’t kill people who are bad. There’s never a traceable motive. But this one is different. She was killed with clear reason. Something has changed for the Ripper.”

Hannibal couldn’t tear his eyes away. He was enchanted by the way Will had tipped his head, and the crease that had appeared between his brows. His lashes lay dark and long against his cheeks, fluttering slightly as his eyes darted back and forth under the lids. He was stunning and brilliant. He was so close to understanding, and Hannibal was deliciously frightened.

“Do you think they might be a wolf?” he asked, both to potentially steer Will in the wrong direction and to see how clearly he saw the truth, “and they are fighting those that would oppress them?”

Will’s nose wrinkled and distaste and disagreement. Hannibal could see he knew better.

“No. If that was the case, the Ripper would have killed more people like this. They would have been caught, because that would be an easily traceable motive. No. What changed must have something to do with a wolf. Maybe even a manifest, but I wouldn’t bank on that yet. The Ripper has gotten to know a wolf. In some way or another, the Ripper likes the wolf. They feel protective.”

Will opened his eyes, looking at Hannibal with a gaze swimming in confusion.

“It doesn’t make sense. The Ripper doesn’t allow themself to become attached. I don’t understand what changed.”

Hannibal nodded, considering how he should respond. This was a delicate time, where the wrong word could send the entire card house tumbling down.

“Perhaps the Ripper believes this wolf is like them. Perhaps they think alike.”

Will’s eyes cleared, and his face lit with understanding.

“Yeah, I think that must be it,” he said softly, “the Ripper feels lonely.”

That struck Hannibal sharply, cutting close to the core. He had never felt lonely before he had met Will. He hadn’t realized his soul was bared so clearly by this scene, and knew he would have to tread even more carefully now.

Will looked back down at the file, this time with an unmistakable hunger in his gaze. Hannibal believed he would be soaking in every detail.

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Will couldn’t stop looking. The scene was strangely beautiful, engaging his mind in a way nothing else ever had.

It was a recreation of a painting Will recognized. He considered it part of a set, and not the most popular of them.

Mendacibus et histrionibus occisa in puteo jacet alma veritas. The nurturer truth lies in a well, having been killed by liars and actors.

Meyers lay sprawled on the ground, a wooden pail by her elbow and a mirror suspended above her. There was one photo Will particularly appreciated, where the angle caught the reflection of the woman’s face in the floating mirror. The angle of her neck showed it was likely broken, and the position of her limbs looked uncomfortable. If she were not dead, laying that way for long would have left her sore.

It was poetic, almost comically ironic, that this particular woman was chosen to embody truth in her death. As far as Will had been able to find, she had never spoken with a Manifest Wolf, might never have met one in person. All her opinions had been indoctrinated in her youth, and she had worked hard to perpetuate the cycle.

Despite himself, Will had once had a dream where the faces in the mob had been hers. The words of her posts and papers had echoed in his head as he ran, insisting he was less than human and deserved every debasing thing the world could offer.

So it was little wonder Will felt a warm flush of validation and justice when he saw her broken neck and wide, vacant eyes. She had finally been silenced, punished for the hate she had spread.

It was wrong of Will to feel that way. It was disrespectful. But he felt no guilt for his feelings. Meyers would have had him muzzled and collared if she’d had her way. He felt owed this small amount of delight at seeing her vanquished.

But how was Hannibal reacting to Will's strange behavior?

The thought snapped Will back to the present, and looked at Hannibal. The man looked merely curious, his head tilted like a cat. He didn't look worried. Only fascinated.

Will swallowed, trying o put his mind back into the place of the Ripper rather than his own. It was more difficult than it ought to be. He was too invested in this case to be truly objective.

"I don't think I can be of much help with this one," Will said regretfully, closing the file against his urge to look at it longer, "I'm too close. I'm invested. It'll muddle my thinking."

Will put the file down on the table next to his hip and rubbed at his eyes. His mind felt like warm cotton, soft and spongy and loose. The back of his eyelids were seared with the picture of the dead woman and her perfect reflection.

"I beg to differ," Hannibal said, standing and crowding Will against the table, "you are providing valuable insight. You know more about the victim than I, and can see the killer more clearly. Though, to ease Jack's conscience on the subject and provide you more freedom, I would suggest you not officially join the case."

Will's mind and body were all confused and overwhelmed. He was still full of thoughts and images from the case that made him feel pleased against his better judgment, but his ears and nose were filled with Hannibal, and he felt the warm solidity of him. All these mixed together, filling him to bursting with pleasure and desire.

Some part of him cried that combining Hannibal with the murder like this could really cross some wires in his brain and mess him up further in a way that might not be fixed.

But he didn't listen to it.

Will lifted his hands to Hannibal's hair and pulled him into a kiss, holding him there and again feeling that desire to claw his way into Hannibal's ribcage.

He managed to keep his claws back, but it was a near thing.

Chapter End Notes

Casually slipping in one of my favorite paintings~
I hope you all enjoyed this, and a little peek into Will's growing darkness. <3

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Hannibal was more than pleased.

Will had seen so much, and not been disgusted or afraid. If Hannibal were to venture a guess, he would say Will had been pleased by the scene. The fervor with which he had kissed Hannibal, even pulling his hair, further convinced him.

Will didn't have the faintest scent of fever on him, had been gaining weight and muscle, and had smiled more in the past day than Hannibal had seen from him before then.

Everything was going fabulously well.

Will yawned, his face scrunching before he gave his head a small shake and settled it back on his paws.

He was spending a lot of time in this form, wanting desperately to be allowed to swim in the lake. Hannibal hoped it would work. He wanted Will to do anything that would make him happy, especially if Hannibal could provide it for him.

Hannibal wondered what he would have to do to convince the owner of this place to sell it.

He was nearly done with his sketch of Will, this one similar to the one he had done the night Will had first shown him his shifted form, by accident. Will was not laying in front of a fire, but instead curled up on the couch under the window. Will seemed to particularly like that spot, especially when the sun slanted in and warmed it.

Will's ears twitched, just turning as he slept. Hannibal wondered if he was reacting to sounds from his dream or sounds from the waking world. He wondered if there was any way to find out. He also wondered what Will was dreaming of. He thought he would ask when Will woke.

Hannibal wondered how a creature like Will Graham could possibly exist. It seemed nigh impossible, and even less likely that Hannibal would have the pleasure of existing on the planet at the same time as him.

If he ever doubted a God existed, this compelled him to believe.

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Will was running again. He couldn't catch his breath, and the thunder of feet in his pursuit deafened him to everything but the chanting of hate. They were coming for him, and he could never outrun them. Trees passed by on every side, and Will weaved through them in his attempt to lose his pursuers. Despite all his efforts, they gained ground and were close behind him.

Just like in every dream.

Just as Will felt their fingers clutching at his fur, accusing and claiming, everything came to an abrupt stop. They were gone, the voices and hands. There was no one chasing him anymore.

Will looked around, searching for any explanation. His eyes landed on a figure in the dark. It was large and black and threatening. As it moved, appearing to circle him as a predator circles a wounded animal, Will caught sight of a great rack of antlers above its head and the shimmer of a thick pelt of feathers.

Will knew the creature, but no name came to mind. Just the smell of blood, and images of death.

The creature stepped forward, into the light, and Will saw it in full for the first time. It was a huge feathered stag, as dark as tar. It was larger than Will, though he was in his most monstrous form. Will felt he would not win a fight with the creature, though it had the shape of a prey animal.

Lucky for him, the stag seemed to have no interest in attacking him. It only watched him carefully, as if he might be the first to strike.

Will set his head on his paws, laying down to show he didn't want any trouble, but didn't dare take his eyes off the stag. The creature stepped closer, so the large cloven hooves were only about a foot from Will's paws. Then, it lowered itself so they were laying nose to nose. Will was filled with wonder and awe, unable to comprehend the full meaning of such a gesture.

Will could feel the pure, raw power of the stag, even as it continued to behave in such a calm and controlled manner. It could easily kill him, but it was choosing this.

Companionship.

And Will understood, in that moment, that the stag had made the mob disappear. Whether it had banished them or merely frightened them away, the stag had saved him from those claiming, frightening hands.

Despite the low level of fear that was creeping along his spine the longer he spent in the company of the stag, Will couldn't help but feel a rush of gratitude.

Will shifted forward, touching his nose to the stag's, hoping to show the creature his appreciation. The stag hesitated a moment, then its tongue flicked out and swiped over Will's nose. As it happened, Will caught a glimpse of the teeth in the stag's mouth. They were sharp and fang like, betraying the fact that the stag truly was a predator.

Will smelled blood.

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It was more difficult to tell if Will was truly asleep while he was shifted, Hannibal found. Will could have been faking it, though Hannibal couldn't think of any reason he would be

doing so. It was just something interesting he noticed.

All at once, Will's body jumped, and his eyes flew open. His ears turned towards the window, and he sat up to look out at the trees. He had heard something, even through his sleep, and was alert.

Hannibal stood, and Will turned to him briefly before hopping off the couch and going to the door. He waited there expectantly, for Hannibal to open the door for him. Hannibal did so, though he was concerned about why. Something had woken Will, and was making him anxious. Hannibal was concerned.

Will immediately stepped out and began pacing from one end of the porch to the other, staring into the trees and growling lowly. Hannibal could not see or hear anything, but he trusted there was something to be wary of if Will thought there was.

Then, a branch snapped, alerting Hannibal to the presence of something out there. He and Will both turned their heads towards the sound, silent and waiting.

Will let out one sharp yip, and a young man stumbled from the brush, his eyes wide. Hannibal noted the pointy ears and slowly swishing tail, auburn to match the shade of his close-cropped hair. He was barefoot, and wearing loose clothing, making Hannibal think he had been shifted for some part of the journey here. He was looking at Will, as if Hannibal wasn't even there.

Will's hackles raised, and he began growling again.

The boy's ears dropped against his skull and he spread his hands in surrender.

"Please, Mister Graham," he called, his voice wavering and exposing exactly how young he was. He couldn't be more than nineteen.

Will stopped growling, looking at the boy with clear confusion. He glanced back at Hannibal, then turned to the boy again.

"She was right. God, I thought she was a fool, just like everyone else did. But she was right. You are here."

The boy had clearly learned of where they were from someone, and Hannibal had the idea he wouldn't be comfortable speaking with anyone other than Will himself. That left them few options.

"Will," Hannibal said calmly, "why don't you go in and dress. I'll watch the boy until you return. I think it would be to our benefit to learn what brings him here."

Will glanced between Hannibal and the intruder, clearly unhappy with that, but then he gave a nod and headed inside through the door Hannibal still held open. Hannibal stepped out onto the porch, fixing the boy with a look that would leave most people uncomfortable and nervous.

At first, the boy didn't seem to really notice Hannibal, but after a moment of being alone with him in silence, the expression Hannibal wore got to him and he shuffled anxiously on his feet.

Hannibal wanted the boy gone, but he felt it would be prudent to learn how he had found them first. If nothing else, it could help them keep it from happening again.

Will's period of rest had already been interrupted more than Hannibal had hoped. And now that he had finally begun to think about the Ripper, Hannibal didn't want any more distractions until they were forced to rejoin society. This boy was a great inconvenience.

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Will ran a hand through his hair nervously as he headed back to the front porch.

It wasn't a good sign that this guy had shown up now. Whatever he wanted, he shouldn't have been able to find them. Will didn't know the guy, which gave Will reason to believe he hadn't tracked them through any sense of smell or something else easy.

Which meant he had a source that had given him information.

Who could have an idea of where they were?

Well, there was one person who had been at Will's apartment when they left. Someone who had already started making a habit out of causing trouble for Will. Someone who couldn't seem to mind their own business.

This entire situation stank of Freddie Lounds.

Will hoped he would never have the displeasure of meeting her. If Hannibal had his way, the restraining orders would actually do their job this time. Will hoped that would be the case.

Will stepped out onto the porch, and the boy immediately perked up. His eyes were wide and hazel, and his tail wagged. He was excited to see Will.

Will studied him for a long moment, trying to remember if he had been a member of that crowd outside the hospital. Despite Will's nearly perfect memory for most things, he couldn't be positive. He might have been there, but he might not have.

"Mister Graham," the boy breathed, as if meeting a god in the flesh. It made the hair at the back of Will's neck stand on end.

Hannibal shifted closer to Will, but didn't touch. He was honoring Will's wish for them to hide their relationship, even though this was just one boy, and they were somewhere they should have been safe. Will was grateful to him for the consideration, though he dearly wanted the comfort of his touch in that moment. He had a bad feeling about what this boy would tell them.

"Why don't you come inside?" Will asked, though he wanted to bare his teeth and make the boy turn tail. He wanted this to already be over. But they needed to know. And, some part of him needed to protect the pup he saw the boy as. The barefoot child who had come to him. "Rest your feet while we talk."

Will heard Hannibal's heartbeat, and it didn't speed up at all at the suggestion despite the visible tension in his posture. He probably didn't much like the idea, but it didn't look like he was going to argue. This was Will's rodeo, apparently.

The boy nearly vibrated with his excitement, stepping closer.

“Yes, sir,” he said, “you’re too kind, sir.”

Will sighed and ran a hand over his face.

“Stop calling me sir,” he said, forcing himself to keep his tone even and calm, “My name is Will, and you already know that. Before you come in, what’s your name?”

The boy hesitated when Will corrected him, then grinned when he recognized the question.

“Mark,” He said, “Mark Antony Leonard. My parents are history nerds.”

Will nodded.

“Then come, Mark. I think we need to talk.”

Mark nodded and scurried up. Hannibal held the door for both Will and Mark, his eyes questioning when they met Will’s, and displeased when he looked at Mark. Will understood that, and he was glad Hannibal was at least letting this happen.

What a strange change of dynamic this was. Will had defended Hannibal from Jack, had been tough and sharp to agents and doctors in an attempt to be seen as hard and capable. Bow, he was at a disadvantage, and Hannibal was the one who would have to defend Will if this went south. Will could not treat this wolf pup the same way he had treated Jack Crawford.

Will sat down at the table in the kitchen, waving for Mark to join him.

If Will had been here by himself, the table would have been used as a place to hold anything he needed to set down and later forgot about. It would have ended up collecting an admirable amount of clutter for such a short amount of time.

Because Hannibal was there, it was clear save for a vase holding a few bright flowers from the edge of the woods. Another thing Will was grateful to Hannibal for. He was learning there were so many things he needed Hannibal for, and things he wanted him for, that he hadn’t hardly noticed before.

As they sat, Hannibal moved further into the kitchen and prepared some tea. Will wondered if he was doing it out of compulsive politeness, or simply wanted something to do other than stare menacingly at the young man seeking Will. Whichever, Will was glad.

“Tell me how you ended up here, Mark,” Will said calmly, afraid of the answer but needing to know.

Mark, for his own part, looked sheepishly down at his hands which were wringing together in his lap. Will could see the faint marks of where a collar had rested against the flesh of his neck, and he wondered if Mark had needed to escape in order to come here. He wondered if Mark was seeking protection. Will hoped not, because he could offer none.

“Most of us didn’t believe her,” Mark said, hedging, “because she has implied some terrible things about you in her articles. And it’s really none of her business. How would she even know in the first place?”

This last was paired with a high laugh, betraying the boy's serious nerves. Will felt bad for the boy, but didn't feel as if there was any good way for him to offer comfort.

"Well, I didn't think she could possibly know, but after a few days I got to thinking that even if she was crazy, it wouldn't hurt to check. You know, cover all the bases. Because we really wanted to see you, M- Will."

Will sighed softly.

"Are you talking about Freddie Lounds?" he asked, trying hard to keep the venom and despair out of his voice.

The boy flushed slightly, picking up on Will's displeasure.

"Yes. She said you had come down a road toward this area. I guess she couldn't follow you all the way without being seen, or something, because she didn't know which cabin you're in. She probably hasn't been hanging around here to get pictures or anything, because you would sniff her out. We all know you would."

Will felt a headache coming on. He hadn't had one since being hospitalized, but the tension in his neck and the stress of having to hold back every sharp reaction from this boy was already grating on him and running him down.

"When you talk about "we", who are you referring to?" Will asked, knowing he wouldn't like this answer any more than he had liked the others.

Mark looked surprised, his ears perking up and his eyes blinking a few times as he realized what Will was asking.

"Oh! The wolves, of course," he said, "all us wolves who are indebted to you for what you've done. We've been following your progress since you started working with the FBI, and we're so glad you stopped that woman. You're really helping to show that there's another side to us than what everyone thinks."

Will bit his tongue to keep from growling.

If they wanted society to see them as something, they just had to be it. Will couldn't be the prototype werewolf. He couldn't be the prime example. He was only human. Imperfect. Selfish. Unstable. They had to all work to change the way they were viewed, not rely on a single person.

"What do you know about what happened with that woman?" Will asked, not sure exactly what was made public yet. He hadn't exactly been dying to read about it.

Mark tipped his head, but answered readily enough.

"She was a werewolf, killing regular people. You managed to track her down, and she came after you. You stopped her."

Will nodded. That was all technically correct. He was surprised and relieved Freddie hadn't managed to get all the grisly details of it. Jack had done that right, at least.

"Mark, I want you to stop this," Will said, "I am not anyone to be idolized. Ever. I don't want anyone to look at me as an example of what they should be or how they should act. Is there any way you can convince the other wolves to leave me alone? To forget about me?"

Mark looked confused and mildly insulted, making Will's heart sink.

"Don't you see, Mis-Will?" he asked, "You're all we have. You're the first manifest wolf in the country allowed to be a public figure. And you represent good. We have all been a symbol for evil and violence for so long, and you are finally showing everyone that we are capable of being truly good."

Will thought back to how he had felt when looking at the crime scene from the Ripper. How he had been pleased and excited by it, relishing in the death of someone he had hated. He was afraid of what it meant for Wolves as a group if he was the poster child for good.

"What happens when I fail?" Will asked, almost pleading, "when it turns out Im not perfect? Mark, surely you can see that this isn't sustainable. I'm not going to be able to live up to those standards, and then everyone is going to suffer. There are so many good wolves. Most of them. Let someone better than me be the example."

Mark's ears were down against his skull, and he looked as if he might start to cry. It made Will's heart thrash and flutter in his ribcage, revolting against causing a pup that kind of pain.

"You don't understand, Will," Mark said shakily, accepting the cup of tea Hannibal offered him, "you were chosen. The universe put you in the right place at the right time. Maybe it was even God himself. It was meant to be you."

Will took a drink of his own tea, the liquid hot against the raw and sensitive flesh of his abused tongue. He was glad for the pain, because it grounded him and sharpened his focus.

Hannibal sat down beside Will, a strong and solid supporting presence. Will wanted to lean into the comforting warmth of his body. It was torture, not being allowed.

"Mark," Will said calmly, doing everything he could not to growl with frustration, "If god wanted someone to lead as an example, they should have chosen someone better than me."

Mark's face paled in horror, and Will had a flash of understanding when the next words escaped him.

"Manifest Destiny."

Mark had been there, outside the hospital. Maybe he had made the banner, or helped to hold it up. Maybe he had only seen it and adopted that mentality as he absorbed the energy of those around him. Whether before then or during the strange festivities, Mark began to see Will as a deity. As a God of sorts.

Mark was one of the wolves who had previously ascribed to the angle of simpering submissiveness, because that was easier for him than the other extreme. He had never been athletic, so he allowed himself to bow to the needs of others instead. He would whine and beg for affection and direction, because he would rather deal with that humiliation than try to use his aggression to get his own way.

When he had seen Will in those pictures, had read about how he was working with the FBI, but was not one of them, he had thought it divine. That Will had made himself useful without being beholden to the FBI's every want and whim. That he had managed to become a figure of public admiration rather than fear or outrage. It all came together to make Mark see him as a God.

Will did not fall neatly into either neat option the world offered him, refused to do so. His courage seemed to Mark to be more than human.

Now, Will did growl. It was low and frustrated. It was soft enough it should not have been any reason to worry, as it didn't mean he had any intention to act. Despite that, Mark's ears fell flat against his skull and he cringed back as if Will was going to hurt him.

Will stopped and took a deep breath, drawing on the calm presence of Hannibal beside him.

"Do you still live with your history nerd parents, Mark Antony?" Will asked calmly.

Mark glanced up at Will, then meekly back down to his hands. He was trying to appease, placate, to beg forgiveness for something he had not done wrong. It hurt Will's heart at the same time as it made him more angry. This was what Mark had been taught he must do when he made someone upset. No matter who was at fault.

"Yes," Mark said softly, falling back on the habits he had drilled into himself to avoid causing trouble.

Will nodded. He had expected as much. While there was evidence of a collar, Will doubted he would have been able to escape a partner who made him wear one. They tended to be more possessive, and Mark might not have had the courage to risk angering them. Parents, usually though not always, tended to be easier to mollify.

"Do they know you were there at the hospital, waiting to see me?" Will asked.

Mark's eyes grew wide and frightened, as if he expected Will was about to insist on calling them to snitch.

"No," he said with a gentle shake of his head.

"And they don't know you're here either," Will guessed, though he knew the answer.

Mark looked down at his hands again, contrite and apparently resigned to his fate.

"No," he said again.

Will smiled.

“Good,” he said lightly, “you are an adult, Mark. They don’t need to know where you are all the time.”

Mark looked back up at Will, shocked. Will just nodded again, taking a sip of his tea. He thought he might get somewhere with Mark today, and it might get them all a little closer to where they wanted to be.

“Here’s what I want you to do, Mark,” Will said calmly, “Go home, dress yourself, and start applying for jobs. Start building a life for yourself. You and I both know you don’t need your parents the way everyone tells you to, and waiting for them to find someone who wants to hold your leash isn’t what you want.”

Mark’s mouth had fallen open, now, and he looked as if some circuit in his brain had fried.

“You don’t need anyone,” Will said, holding Mark’s gaze to drive the point home, “so show that to the others. Be your own example. Be who you think you want me to be.”

Mark didn’t say anything for a long moment, apparently trying to put his mind back together. Will thought he was getting through to him. These were the lessons Will’s own father had taught him, and they had seen him through his life to this point. Mark had survived so far by doing what his own parents told him, but Will knew there was only one way for him to really find himself.

There were some merits to the idea of tough love.

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Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal watched as the young man had a small crisis. He thought Will was doing wonderfully, given the situation.

It seemed Will intended to make wolves stand up for themselves, one wolf at a time.

Will likely didn't have even an inkling, but Hannibal thought he might be a perfect catalyst for a complete upheaval of the system. He was already the face of the revolution, and he was careful and clever enough he could do great things if he accepted that as his role.

But Will didn't want that, so Hannibal would do what he could to help him avoid it. Will would not accept this, and Hannibal knew there was something even more beautiful and powerful that he could become if he only had the chance.

"What if I'm not brave enough?" Mark whispered, and Hannibal saw Will's ears twitch at the sound.

Will spread his hands in a gesture that seemed to invite the boy to offer some other way he could benefit society. He didn't wait for Mark to speak, though.

"You were brave enough to join the crowd outside the hospital, and to find me here," he said, "do you know why?"

Mark frowned deeply.

"Because there were other wolves there," he said, "And because you're the one who can help us all."

Will shook his head. Hannibal thought he detected a trace of impatience with the boy's insistence that he was some kind of savior.

"No. You had the courage because you finally found a cause to fight for. Something that gave you the strength to stand up for yourself. When you disobey your parents, when you apply for jobs, and when you go out on your own, remember what it is. Whether it's just the hope that someday you will be free of it all, or that you can make it better for someone else, think of it. From this day on, you have a noble and divine purpose in this world. To be a tower of strength and an example of courage. To be an inspiration to those who are still too afraid to act."

Mark's eyes were shining with admiration, and Hannibal knew he only half understood what Will was telling him to do. He thought Mark believed he was being called upon by his deity to do these things. Will wanted him to stop seeing him as a God, but he was giving the boy a stone tablet of commandments.

It would do the trick, though. Hannibal could see that much. Mark Antony would leave this place and strive to follow Will's instructions. He would not be thinking of his own purpose and potential for good, though. He would be playing this moment over and over in his mind, when a God had spoken to him and given him a mission to complete.

Mark nodded sharply and stood, his tail swishing back and forth and his ears standing up proudly.

"Yes," he said, nodding again as he moved toward the front door of the cabin, "I'll do it."

Will stood and took him to the door, nodding along with him and making sure he didn't lose his way in his daze.

"And Mark," Will said at the door, taking the boy's attention again, "Don't tell anyone where we are."

Mark nodded again, and he was gone. Off into the trees from whence he came.

Will let out a deep sigh, sagging against the wall. He looked suddenly exhausted, and Hannibal felt his heart reach out to him.

But there was something good about all this, at least in Hannibal's mind. An uprising would find equal resistance, which might push Will more towards his aggression. This might get Hannibal closer to his ultimate goal, in the long run. Frustration could cause Will to finally embrace his nature to the full extent.

Will gave a huff and yanked the door open again, stalking out with a one-minded purpose. Hannibal was startled, but followed him silently, curious to see what he was about to do.

As Will walked, he shed his clothes, shifting before he was fully bared. His huge form loomed over the clearing around the cabin, fur rippling over muscle.

Hannibal watched, stunned and curious. Will jogged around a bit, clearly agitated, then found a large stick, nearly large enough to be called a log, and gnawed on it for a minute before he bit down hard and shattered it between his teeth. Even that didn't seem to have done the trick, and Will began scraping the bark from a tree with his claws, scoring deep into the wood and moving with ferocious aggravation.

Will was growling, low and unhappy. Hannibal wanted to soothe him at the same time as finding it oddly thrilling to see Will struggling with his aggression so clearly.

At length, Will shifted back and pulled on his jeans, his posture slumped and tired. He walked up to Hannibal and set his head on Hannibal's shoulder. Hannibal enclosed him in an embrace, breathing in and considering what to do.

"I just want to be left alone," Will mumbled into Hannibal's chest, "why can't they just leave me alone?"

Hannibal sighed and shook his head, his chin rubbing across Will's hair and ears.

“They have begun to recognize your brilliance, Will,” he said, “perhaps for the wrong reasons, and perhaps they do not understand what they are seeing, but I cannot fault them for wanting to be near you.”

Will huffed, but Hannibal could tell he was smiling.

“I guess you’re biased, so I shouldn’t have asked you,” he said, “even if they aren’t motivated by exactly the same things as you. Would you look at my shoulder again?”

Hannibal smiled and pressed a kiss to the top of Will’s head, right between his ears.

“Of course,” he said, “but first let us gather your clothes.”

Will pulled back, blushing furiously as he turned to pick up his flannel. Hannibal grinned and picked up the white T shirt Will had shed, then turned and went with Will back into the cabin. Will was still blushing, as if Hannibal had not seen him nude already.

Will didn’t bother dressing the rest of the way, sitting in the kitchen and waiting for Hannibal to look at his stitches. Hannibal knew he was anxious to swim. He had been gazing at the lake with clear desire since the first day they had spent here. Hannibal thought it was likely the stitches would be able to come out today, though he hadn’t told Will that. He hadn’t wanted to get his hopes up.

It was strange to Hannibal to be so invested in Will’s emotions and well-being. Even though it had been some time since it had begun, it was foreign to Hannibal to be always thinking of something other than his own wishes and amusement. Will was something entirely new to Hannibal, and he could feel a change taking place inside him.

For better or worse, he had no idea. He didn’t care.

Hannibal gently prodded the flesh around the healing wound, taking the opportunity to touch Will in any way he wanted. He was certain he would never have his fill of the younger man.

“I think the stitches can come out,” Hannibal said, and immediately Will’s tail began thumping the table leg with ecstatic fervor.

“Really?” Will asked, his eyes wide and his ears perked up with his excitement. He looked absolutely edible.

Hannibal nodded.

“Your rapid healing truly is remarkable. I would recommend you be careful with your shoulder, do not overexert yourself. But yes. The stitches may come out. You may swim in the lake.”

Will’s tail was hitting the table leg with enough energy Hannibal worried briefly that he was hurting himself. Will, however, didn’t seem to even notice. He was nearly vibrating with joy at the idea of being able to swim in the beautiful lake he had been coveting all week. Hannibal smiled and huffed a soft laugh, leaving for a moment to retrieve his equipment.

Hannibal wouldn't mind going for a swim, himself. He had refrained from doing so because he felt it would be cruel to Will while he couldn't. There were facets of this new relationship Hannibal was curious to explore, and excited to experience. He was still concerned he would lose control and push Will too far, but he wanted to do more with Will. See more of him.

Their time at the cabin was coming to an end, and Hannibal would miss it. He liked the way Will carried himself here. He was so much more free with himself and his entire body was so much more relaxed. His smile was brighter, and he was just happier.

Hannibal would like to give this life to Will. Perhaps, when everything had cleared up, he would bring Will back here. It wouldn't be too difficult to convince the owner to sell this little piece of land to Hannibal, he was sure. Will was so enchanted with it, he was willing to make a small sacrifice for it.

Hannibal returned to Will and prepared to remove the stitches. Will had a difficult time holding still, thrumming with energy as he was. Hannibal had to set one hand on Will's shoulder to hold him steady as he clipped the first stitch, smiling gently at the younger man as Will's tail thudded heavily against the leg of the table. Despite the normally distressing fact of the small procedure, Will didn't seem nervous at all. He was just grinning to himself and Hannibal, his ears standing up and his tail wagging.

"Alright," Hannibal said as he pulled the last of the thread from Will's shoulder, "it looks good, but remember that you must be careful with it. If you tear this open, Doctor Faith is not likely to forgive me."

Will laughed, and it was relaxed. Hannibal was glad to see him that way after the stress he had just been through.

"I promise," he said, lifting his face and pressing his lips gently to Hannibal's, "care to take a dip with me?"

Hannibal smiled.

"It would be my pleasure," he answered with more honesty than perhaps Will knew.

Will's grin was as bright as his laughter as he made his way to the back deck and raced down the stairs, his tail swishing behind him. He had moved so quickly Hannibal was left hurrying to catch him. Will got down to the small dock at the water and shucked off his jeans once more before diving into the lake.

Hannibal was close behind, now, and began to unbutton his shirt as he watched for Will to resurface.

When Will emerged from the water again, he had shifted once more. His canine grin brought a laugh out of Hannibal without his conscious decision to make the sound. Will was just so comically adorable this way, despite being large enough to easily kill a man. He pumped his long canine legs, swimming easily as he shook his head and sprayed water around in a corona.

Hannibal was down to his boxers, and he slipped into the water just as Will got back to the dock where he was. He began to tread water as Will came up to him, still grinning that enormous canine grin.

Chapter End Notes

It's been a hot minute. Sorry about that. I'm completely caught up in my new fic, Heaven's Rage, and it's consuming all my time, thoughts, and energy. I still managed to get a new chapter of this fic out, and I don't plan on letting anything be abandoned. I just have to wait for my infatuation with my new fic to ebb a bit. Or for a flash of inspiration for one of the others strong enough that it overpowers it.
All that aside, I hope you're all still enjoying this fic. <3

48

Chapter Summary

Time at the cabin wraps up, and the boys head home.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The water felt amazing, and Will felt the stress of having to deal with Mark melt away as he paddled in the lake.

Hannibal was looking at Will with his own wide grin, staring as if there was nothing else in the world worth looking at. It made Will feel good, to have Hannibal's attention so fully. He was sure it would stop the minute they had to go back to the office and their regular lives, but for now he was glad to be with Hannibal and have him looking at him like that.

Will lifted one of his large paws and placed it on Hannibal's shoulder, pushing him down under the surface for one short moment. Not long enough to even hint at a threat. Just to get Hannibal's hair wet.

Hannibal emerged, not even spluttering at all. He shook his head, making his hair fly around him in a bit of a wild fan. It wasn't long, but his hair was now wet and flopping into his face. Will thought it looked good, and remarkably rakish.

Will woofed softly and licked Hannibal's cheek, hoping Hannibal wouldn't be miffed with him. Hannibal only grinned and reached out to ruffle the fur between Will's ears, dipping lower in the water for a moment as one of his hands stopped treading water.

"Playful thing, you will be the death of me," Hannibal said.

Will shook his head, spraying water again.

Will walked out of the water, his muscles aching from the exercise, but he was pleased. Hannibal came down the stairs of the deck, towels and fresh clothes in hand. While he was still out of range, Will shook his body, sending water in every direction. He felt amazing.

Hannibal smiled, laying out one of the towels on the ground beside Will. Will turned and shifted back as he sat on the towel, knowing his skin would dry faster than fur.

"Thank you, Hannibal," Will said, looking up at Hannibal with sincerity, "for everything. I can't remember the last time I felt this good."

Hannibal's eyes softened and he knelt down beside Will, setting the clothes on the towel beside him while taking another towel in his hands. He dropped it over Will's head and began drying his hair and ears.

"You look more healthy and happy than I have ever seen you," he remarked, "it pleases me to see you so. That is all the thanks I require. Seeing you this way is its own reward."

Will chuffed, pulling the towel back so it wasn't covering his face. He looked up at Hannibal, and his chest ached at the thought of returning to the world where they were nothing more than coworkers, and the FBI would come looking for their help again and again. He didn't want to go back to that life, full of death and strangers and obsession. He wished it could just be this, and them, forever. If the world could go away, all but this one part.

Hannibal hadn't put all his clothes back on yet, just his slacks. He looked like some kind of god to Will, golden and glowing in the late sun. Far too perfect to be real, yet inarguably tangible and solid. His hair was still damp and fell over his brow in a way that left him looking incredibly attractive.

Will couldn't believe Hannibal actually wanted anything to do with him, even now.

He wondered if there was any way to preserve this peace.

"What are we going to do when we get back?" Will asked, hating that he was breaking the spell, but knowing it wasn't wise to keep putting it off.

Hannibal sighed softly, as if he dreaded their return to reality just as much as Will did. He sat down beside Will and looked out over the lake.

"We can keep the nature of our relationship a secret, as you have asked," he said, "though I do not know that we can avoid the stigma we were protecting ourselves from, now that Freddie Lounds has spread her rumors. It is your decision to make. Other than that, I will deal with Jack on the Ripper case, and you can relax back into your previous role. I only hope the fervor around your status has died down somewhat. You deserve your privacy."

Will chuffed softly, pulling on the shirt Hannibal had brought for him.

"That's one thing I doubt I'll ever get," he said, "The world isn't ready to let me have it. But maybe I can have a few secrets, someday. Something I can have for myself, without everyone touching it with their greedy hands."

Will could feel Hannibal's eyes on him, but he didn't turn to meet them just yet. He was staring into the trees, wondering if someday he could have a family of sorts. A pack. Just some people who made him feel safe, and less alone. Hannibal could be a part of it, the first one he had found. It didn't matter that he wasn't a wolf. Will didn't care. He would build a life with whatever he wanted, and he wouldn't let anyone stop him.

After the Ripper case, he would go somewhere. He hoped Hannibal would go with him. Away. Just somewhere people didn't recognize him. Maybe to a different country. Supposedly, things were better for Manifest Wolves outside of the states. If you knew where

to go. Will thought Hannibal would know. Hannibal could help him build another life. Somewhere safe.

Will turned and smiled to Hannibal.

“After we find out what the damage is from Lounds, we’ll talk about what to let people know,” he said, “It’s not worth wasting our concern on right now. I just want to enjoy the time we have left.”

Hannibal smiled widely, leaning forward and catching Will in a kiss. His hands slid into Will’s hair, holding him in place and deepening the kiss. Will heard his tail wapping against the ground as he held onto Hannibal, but he had stopped caring. Hannibal had made him stop caring about the things that betrayed his feelings. He had a right to emotions as much as anyone else. The good and the bad.

And he was safe here, safe with Hannibal. Showing how he felt wouldn’t put him in any danger.

“Will Graham, I am entirely bewitched by you. I cannot think of anything you could ask of me that I would not do.”

Will felt the impact of those words like a thump in his chest. Like a second heartbeat. One that matched the beat he could hear in Hannibal’s chest. They should have frightened him. They should have felt too serious and too strong. Something that shouldn’t have been said while this thing was so new between them. It should have scared him right out of his wits.

But instead they made him feel powerful. He felt as if, with just those words, he had permission to do whatever he wanted. Anything within his power was perfectly alright, as long as he wished for it. Hannibal could give that to him, make everything alright. Take away all consequences.

That should have scared him, too. But it didn’t.

Will pushed Hannibal’s chest, laying Hannibal down on the ground so he could loom over him. Hannibal’s pupils blew wide, and Will grinned. He could see the reflection of his own teeth, sharp and canine, in the blackness of Hannibal’s eyes.

“Promises,” Will chirped, “whatever am I supposed to do with you after that?”

Hannibal pulled Will down and kissed him again.

“I suppose all you can possibly do is ask me to do something.”

Hannibal saw Will glancing back at the cabin as they loaded the car with their things. Will was clearly sad to be leaving, as Hannibal was.

But there were things to be done, and Hannibal couldn’t deny that he was also excited at the prospect of what lay before them. Will would dive deeper into the mind of the Ripper, and

really, truly come to understand Hannibal. They could come so much closer, until the lines between them began to blur.

Hannibal would give him another gift. If he could get ahold of Bruce Reeves, it would be the pinnacle of the sounder. He would make such a display Will would be unable to deny that he was pleased with it. He would draw Will closer and closer, showing him that he could be so much more, powerful, beautiful.

Yes, they must return to the real world, so Will could become what he was meant to be. What lurked beneath his skin, clamoring to be set free.

Will had not taken Hannibal up on the offer to do anything he asked. Not yet, at least. Hannibal had seen the way Will's pupils had dilated at the promise, and his ears had perked up right away. Though a promise like that was a risk, could have scared Will away with the sudden seriousness of the offer, it had paid off. Will had been pleased by it, and empowered.

Things were going well.

Will watched the trees pass by outside the window until they had left the forest behind. When they were back in the city, he sighed and slumped down in his seat. He looked unhappy and nervous, and Hannibal wanted to change that. He knew it was just a reaction to his expectations regarding how things would go now, and it would pass. Hannibal would make sure things went well for them both.

Things had to go well, so Hannibal would make them. He always got what he wanted.

Will began to doze a bit, but shook himself awake as they neared his apartment. His eyes were wide and busy, searching for any sign of something amiss. Hannibal understood that, after everything that had happened. Will valued his privacy, and worried he would never truly have it again.

But Hannibal would not let anything happen to him. It would all be alright.

Hannibal stopped the car in front of the apartment building, giving Will's hand a gentle squeeze for reassurance. Will offered him a tense smile, and they stepped out of the car. Will still looked nervous, but he took the things Hannibal handed him and led the way to the door. Hannibal was calm, sure there was nothing amiss in the slightest.

Will opened the door and stepped into the apartment, freezing on the spot. Hannibal followed behind, tipping his head at Will's behavior.

"Something's wrong," Will said, and that was when all Hell broke loose.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I didn't realize they've been at the cabin for basically half of the fic by now. XD I've just really enjoyed letting them have this time. And now I have to keep doing plot things. :(It's not going to be very fun for them. (but it's very entertaining for me)

I hope you're still enjoying it, and not too disappointed by how it's going. <3

49

Chapter Summary

We're back!

Warning, this chapter is... not fun. I don't know exactly what kind of warnings it needs. So just... be prepared.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will opened his eyes and winced at the light as it sent a shock of pain through his skull. He quickly took stock of himself, and thought he likely had a concussion. He couldn't remember the last few seconds before he was hit over the head with something, but he must have shifted because he was lying on his stomach with his head on his paws.

He didn't know where he was, but he knew it was bad.

His heart began to pound as he realized he had been chained and muzzled. Just like before. When he had been a teenager.

He couldn't stop himself from letting out a loud, high whine as he realized his position, and he heard people coming closer in response to the sound. He stood up, realizing he was in his domestic form, and much less threatening. This was bad.

Where was Hannibal?

Will cast his head about, searching his prison for Hannibal and wincing as the chain clanked loudly.

The chain was thick and short, keeping him within the confines of the room even if the door had been opened. There were a few sets of chains just like it around the edge of the room, each one of a length that would keep the wolf attached inside the room.

Whoever had done this had known what they were doing. He wouldn't be able to get out of this with only his brute strength. Trying to shift into his full form would strangle him on the steel collar, and he wasn't strong enough to break the chain in this form.

He would be more vulnerable if he shifted back to his human form, naked and bound as he was, but it might be his only chance. He needed fingers, and a more slender neck. If nothing else, the muzzle would be easier to get off if he didn't have a snout.

But not yet. They were coming closer, and they would tell Will why he was here. They might even tell him where Hannibal was.

The first person Will saw was Mark Antony Leonard. Also muzzled and collared. The boy was covered in bruises and burns, and one of his ears trickled blood into his auburn hair. Mark whimpered when he saw Will, and was shoved to the floor by the next person to enter the room.

Three followed, all carrying electric cattle prods. Will pulled his lips back and bared his teeth in a snarl, knowing what kind of people these were.

One more person entered, unarmed but clearly in charge. He was grinning widely, as if he just couldn't wait to meet Will. It made Will even more nervous, and afraid for Hannibal.

"Well, Mister Graham. You certainly have been a busy boy, haven't you?" the man said.

Will let out a low growl, a warning for him not to come closer. One of the men holding a cattle prod shifted forward, but the boss waved him down, still grinning as if this was his favorite game.

"Now now, Mister Graham. You play nice, or you won't like the consequences," he said, and gave a small but sharp kick to Mark's ribcage.

Mark let out a harsh yelp and cowered away, his tail between his legs and his ears flat against his skull. Will immediately shut his mouth and forced himself to stop growling.

He could see Mark had not done anything wrong, and didn't deserve to be here. As frustrating as it had been for him to interrupt their time at the cabin, he was just a kid. A kid who had needed a little guidance. Will hoped Mark wasn't there because of him, but he had the sinking feeling he was.

"Much better," the man said, clapping his hands once, "Now, we can talk like adults."

Will refused to react to that pointed comment, just watching the man with pure murder in his heart. If anything had been done to Hannibal, God help them all when Will got free. His teeth ached with the desire to feel this man's bones crunch between them.

"You've been causing a lot of trouble for me," the man said, crouching to look Will in the eye, "stirring up people who are usually so calm and obedient. It's no wonder people think you're monsters."

Will pulled his lips back again, but didn't growl. His anger and hate for this man grew with every word that fell from his mouth. The man tisked, as if dealing with a misbehaving child.

"Alright. Introductions," he chirped, "I'm Mason Verger. We haven't met, but I think you've likely heard of my family."

Will didn't do anything in response. He certainly had heard of the Vergers. They were literally terrors, especially to wolves. Molson Verger had once proposed a selective breeding program for wolves in order to effectively eliminate Manifest Wolves and create a breed of

docile, obedient, hardworking shifters. Because of his political connections, Molson had nearly succeeded, despite the horror of the concept. It was generally agreed that the Vergers were the worst monsters, though one would be hard pressed to find someone willing to say as much on the record.

Well, Will supposed he would have been selectively castrated, were Molson successful. That is, unless he were euthanized.

So, was that what Mason had in mind for him now?

“I see you’re familiar with the Verger name,” Mason said brightly, picking up on Will’s nerves, “but you don’t have to worry about what my daddy would have done to you if he’d had his way. I have different plans.”

By the way Mason was looking at him, Will guessed these plans were not too far removed from what Molson had in mind. Likely along the same lines, but worse. Mason’s reputation for sadism went along with the tales of his father’s cruelty. What Will really cared about was what had happened to Hannibal.

“Now, why are you not changing?” Mason asked, as if his favorite animal at the zoo was asleep, “you might be able to escape if you were bigger, yeah?”

Will chuffed and shook his head, the chain clanking loudly. Mason raised an eyebrow, apparently not getting the hint.

“He’ll strangle if he tries,” Mark gasped softly, as if afraid speaking up would earn him another kick, “the collar is metal. It’s too small for his full form.”

Mason glanced at Mark, then looked back to Will with a brightly delighted grin. Apparently, this was going far better than he had expected.

“Well, isn’t that a delight,” he said, “I guess you won’t be going anywhere, then, Mister Graham.”

Will didn’t respond. He could see it wasn’t necessary in this case. Mason would carry on all himself.

“My thoughts are a bit grander than what my daddy had in mind. There’s something about you that activates the aggressive genes in these other wolves,” he said, gesturing to Mark, “and I want that. You’re the key to everything.”

Will narrowed his eyes, his mind racing.

Mason wanted to cause a war. For whatever reason, he wanted a war. He wanted Will to make the wolves fight back, so there would be a war. Wolves against everyone else.

Apparently, Mason didn’t realize Will wasn’t trying to have that affect. All Will wanted was to get through this life going largely under the radar. Everything that had happened recently to put him in the spotlight had happened against his will, and he wanted it to stop. Mason

might think Will also wanted a war, though his methods of gaining an ally were dubious at best.

A conflict like this would be devastating. The wolves wouldn't know much about fighting, because they were discouraged from pursuing careers that involved combat or conflict. But they were strong and they heal quickly. The ones that had pursued athletics would have an edge, but what about kids like Mark? They would just be gun fodder.

Will wouldn't do it. He wouldn't let Mason use him to cause the deaths of so many innocents. Whatever he had to do to stop it, he would.

"You see, I've been trying to stir things up in my own way for years," Mason continued, unaware of Will's racing thoughts, "But nothing I have tried has worked miracles the way your little stunts have. I wish you would tell me your secrets."

Will chuffed again and shook, clanking the chain pointedly. Another wolf would know what he meant by it, but he wasn't sure if Mason would.

One of the thugs tipped his head, and Will realized he was a wolf. Not manifest, of course, but definitely a wolf. Will caught his scent and confirmed it. That man knew what Will meant.

"He wants you to take off the collar," the man said, his accent thick and his words hesitant, "He makes as if he will talk to you if you do."

Mason laughed delightedly.

"What a treat you are, Mister Graham. I'm afraid not, but I would like to see what you would do if I did. Maybe later. Right now, I need to talk to you about our mutual friend, Doctor Lecter."

Will stilled, listening completely now. If Mason told him where Hannibal was, Will would begin to make a plan.

"Ah, I see I got your attention with that," Mason said, " I thought I might. I'm curious about the thing you've got going between you two. I mean, you don't exactly make the ideal couple do you?"

Will only stared back at Mason, tempted to shift human just so he could verbally chew him out. He wouldn't, but the urge was there.

"Are you the one who seduced him, or the other way around?" Mason continued crassly, "I bet it was you. From pictures, you seem to have a set of pretty, innocent eyes. Is Doctor Lecter into that? I guess he must be. What I can't understand is how anyone can be into the tail thing."

If Will had been in his human form, he would have blushed furiously at that. He was uncomfortable with this turn, but he couldn't do anything about it yet.

“See, doesn’t it get in the way? Do you get fur all over the sheets? Does Doctor Lecter keep a lint roller on the nightstand?”

“You perverted mother-”

Mark’s sudden outburst was cut off by a sharp kick from one of the thugs. He was sent sprawling again, another yelp torn from his throat. Will was impressed by Mark’s bravery in speaking up in the first place, but he was angry and frustrated that Mason had put them both in this situation.

“I’ll ask our good doctor,” Mason said, as if Mark wasn’t even there, “When he starts talking to me. Maybe I’ll get you to shift back, and I’ll compare your answers. See if you can come up with the same lie, or actually tell me the truth.”

Will pulled his lips back in another snarl. Mason didn’t seem to notice.

“I’m fascinated by Doctor Lecter,” he said, “Most psychiatrists are such soft souls. He won’t answer my questions, though, and he doesn’t seem all that frightened. He just asks about you.”

Mason pressed his lips together, clearly displeased.

“I hope you’ll be more entertaining.”

With that, Mason stood back up, motioned to his thugs, and left. The men with the cattle prods lingered, one chaining Mark to the other end of the room, while the others watched silently. Will got the sense they were just itching to use their prods, and he didn’t intend to give them any reason to.

That resolve left him in a rush when Mark’s chain was yanked harshly, and the boy let out a sharp gagging sound.

Will lunged forward, growling. He hit the end of his chain, but not before the muzzle had made thudding contact with the belly of one of the thugs. The one who he’d hit fell backward while another jabbed the prod into Will’s ribs.

Will felt the shock of electricity course through his body, and he was thrown away from them. Will had to take a moment to unlock his lungs and breathe again, and the thugs had a quick exchange in a language he didn’t understand.

Then, they were gone. It was just Will and Mark Antony.

“I’m sorry, Will,” Mark whimpered, curling up against the wall, “I’m not as strong as you.”

Will lifted himself off the ground, panting and aching. He didn’t have time to worry about Mark and what he had said to Mason.

Right now, Will had to focus on getting out of the collar.

Will sat down near the wall where the chain was attached. He closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths to calm his pulse. He didn’t know what they were doing to Hannibal, but he would stop them.

Will shifted, feeling the collar grow loose around his neck as his shape changed. The muzzle also felt loose, and he opened his eyes.

Mark was staring at him with naked hope, expecting Will to be his savior again.

Will bared his teeth.

Chapter End Notes

I didn't abandon this fic! I swear I didn't mean for this to happen! It's back. I don't know when the next chapter will be ready, but I promise I won't abandon it. I'm so sorry for the wait. Forgive me.

Next chapter is liable to be worse than this one. Unless some miracle happens. But I don't think so.
Have fun!

50

Chapter Summary

What is Hannibal up to, while Will is chained up in the basement? Let's take a look.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal mentally cursed himself again. He had become drunk on his own pride, and allowed this to happen. They hadn't hurt him yet, seeing him as very little threat, but he had no way of knowing what they were doing to Will.

Mason's plan, crass and grotesque, could not be allowed. His use for Will was absolutely unacceptable. Hannibal wondered if Mason would tell Will the full extent of what was planned for him.

Essentially, Mason wanted Will to father a new generation of aggressive wolves. The apple had not fallen far from the tree at all, in this case. The eugenics experimentation Mason had planned was not only disgusting and unethical, but actively harmful to the progress society had made towards accepting Wolves. He wanted to create an army of Wolves, and pit them against the rest of the world.

Hannibal couldn't allow it. If he had any way to do so, he had to stop Mason from doing this. Hopefully before he even tried to use Will for it.

Hannibal hoped Will hadn't been hurt, but he knew it was more than likely he had been. Will would not go quietly along with Mason's plans. He would fight back, and Hannibal had seen the cattle prods the men with Mason carried.

Mason would regret ever hearing Will's name when Hannibal found his chance to put this all to rights.

The door opened, and Mason himself entered.

"Well, our little pup doesn't seem very well socialized," Mason said, "Must not have been let around the other pups very much. He just doesn't seem to understand what it is I'm trying to do here."

Hannibal didn't visibly react. He knew Mason wanted him to panic, and he couldn't allow himself to. He wouldn't give Mason the satisfaction, and he wouldn't let his mind be clouded.

"I think it more likely he understands exactly what you intend," Hannibal said calmly, "His powers of perception are far beyond even mine. That is why he has been such a useful tool to

the FBI."

Mason nodded, waving it away as if it was of little consequence. Hannibal thought it very likely that would be Mason's undoing.

"I'm not interested in that right now, Doctor Lecter," Mason said, "I have a lot of questions for you both, though. Hopefully I can get the answers from you, since our friend Will isn't exactly in a conversational mood."

Hannibal smiled at that. Will had shifted moments before he had been hit over the head, and it seemed as if he refused to shift back in order to talk to Mason. His beautiful, stubborn boy.

Hannibal hoped Will would not be incapacitated by fear. He had no doubt Mason had collared and muzzled him, and the memories of his past could be paralyzing. If he was, it would mean it was up to Hannibal to get them out of this situation.

"If you would be so kind as to uncuff me, I would be happy to have a civil conversation with you," Hannibal lied, spreading his hands as far as the cuffs would allow.

Mason laughed.

"I don't think so, Doctor, but after we talk a little I might let you see your little sugar puppy. I can tell he's worried about you."

Hannibal set his jaw, anger flaring at the way Mason dared to speak about Will. As if he were lesser. He could not allow Mason to see his rage. Not until it was too late.

"First of all," Mason said, taking a seat in front of Hannibal, "I'm curious about what exactly the draw is for you. Do you have a tail kink or something? I mean, don't get me wrong, I know there are some kinky bastards out there. I just didn't peg you as one."

Hannibal closed his eyes, praying for the strength to endure this.

"I'm afraid you will not get any answers to questions like that," he said calmly, "not from me. It is quite a personal matter."

Mason pouted dramatically, as if Hannibal might be swayed by his crazed eyes. Hannibal was not.

"Alright," Mason sighed, "I'll let up on you in that area for now. I have more pressing things to learn. Do you think Will is naturally disposed to aggression, or did he learn it from his daddy? Was Will raised in a rough house?"

Hannibal wasn't sure why Mason would need to know that, unless he thought Will's aggression might not easily pass down to the planned progeny. But surely it wouldn't change how Mason planned to use him.

"I ascribe to neither school of thought in regards to Will," Hannibal said, "What Will is may never be fully articulated by the english language. He is entirely his own."

Mason grinned, that malicious glint returning to his eyes. Like a playground bully at the first sign of weakness.

“Oh, Doctor Lecter, I think I figured it out after all. He did seduce you. I should have known. A psychiatrist like you. Of course you would be interested in a case like his. He reeled you in like a fish.”

Hannibal did not respond, imagining all the delightful sounds Mason’s bones would make as he broke them. When he was out of here, Mason would not die quickly or painlessly.

Mason waved again, as if telling Hannibal to forget it.

“Do you think Will would ever agree to do what I want willingly?” he asked, “If I asked just right?”

Hannibal allowed himself to hesitate to answer that. He knew what Mason was asking. He wanted to know if torturing Will could earn his submission. He might even be considering torturing Hannibal where Will could be witness, in order to get him to surrender.

Hannibal didn’t know. He wanted to think Will would never give up, was stronger than that. He felt it was true in his heart. But he logically didn’t trust that impression entirely. Because Will had been hurt many times in this life, and his walls had been broken down. Hannibal himself had been trying to break down those walls, and he had been succeeding. Will might be at his most vulnerable right now, because of Hannibal.

And Will was viciously protective of Hannibal. Had been since before they had kissed for the first time. Hannibal had known that. Hannibal might be Will’s biggest weakness.

Hannibal may never forgive himself if that proved to be true here.

“You would have to ask Will that question,” Hannibal answered slowly, “I do not know everything about him. I do not know how to coerce him into something he does not wish to do.”

Mason laughed crudely.

“I’m sure,” he said, “but truly? You’ve never wheedled him about anything? I find that hard to believe.”

Hannibal smiled.

“Will is resistant to wheedling,” he answered, “he fights it with force. I’ve learned there is not use in it.”

Mason huffed, but nodded.

“Fine. Sure. Whatever you say. Now, is Will exclusively into men? ‘Cause that might make things a bit more difficult for me. Not by much, but it sure won’t make things easier.”

Hannibal frowned.

“Again, I do not know everything about him. I have not asked him that. It’s a quite rude question to ask, I’m sure you’re aware. I also refuse to speculate.”

Mason rolled his eyes.

“I know you’ve got this mask of propriety, Doctor, but come on! You can drop the ceremony. It’s just us boys here. No one needs to know what you say to me. I’m trying to perform a transaction. You tell me what I want to know, and you get to see the dog toy. Work with me here.”

Hannibal smiled wryly.

“For all I know, you have already hurt Will beyond repair,” he said, though he didn’t believe it was true. Couldn’t. “I will not speak with you any more unless I am permitted to see him.”

Mason checked his watch and shook his head.

“Sorry, can’t do that. Not yet. I want to see how he reacts to the situation he’s in, and I expect it to take at least another hour. You’ll just have to trust me until then. If he reacts the way I want, you might be free to go.”

Mason stood.

“I’ll come back in a minute to see if you’re ready to talk. I’ll send some food and water as well. I’m a good host, regardless of my other qualities.”

Hannibal would have differed, had he been in the position where that would not be detrimental to his circumstances. As it was, he only nodded his thanks as Mason left the room.

Mason was a fool. They had not even thought to search Hannibal thoroughly when he was unconscious. He had a scalpel, which would be useful so long as he could free at least one of his hands.

Soon, the door opened again and a man walked in with a plate of food, presumably for Hannibal. While it didn’t look or smell entirely inedible, Hannibal had no intention of eating any of it.

There were two men in the room with Hannibal, clearly not considering him a threat. The moment one of them had uncuffed one of his hands so he could eat, Hannibal took hold of the collar of his shirt and pulled sharply, cracking his face against the table. The man dropped like a stone while the other stepped forward and pulled his cattle prod from his belt.

Hannibal spun onto his feet, one hand still cuffed to the chair, placing the chair between himself and the other man who was rushing at him.

The man lunged, aiming to hit Hannibal in the chest with the sparking prod. Hannibal ducked behind the chair, then reached up and caught the man’s arm, pulling down and hearing the man scream in pain as the bones in his arm snapped across the back of the chair. Hannibal

stood again, taking the prod from the man’s limp hand and producing the scalpel from his sleeve.

Slitting both throats so there wasn’t any risk of them getting up to attack him, Hannibal plucked the key from the first man’s hand and uncuffed himself.

He heard shouts and approaching feet as he rubbed at the light red lines on his wrists. He expected he would have to cut his way through quite a bit of flesh in order to find Will, and he was prepared to do so. Nothing on or below this earth would stop him.

The shouting turned to screams, and Hannibal frowned. He heard something approaching that didn’t sound like feet, but rather a creature on four legs.

Before he even had time to realize what that meant, the door burst open with a shower of splinters, and Will was there, in all his glory, body heaving with heavy breaths and muscles rolling under his dark fur.

Will’s bright blue eyes caught Hannibal’s, and an understanding passed between them without a word.

Will knew.

Chapter End Notes

It's been forever! Part of that is because I had an entire, detailed fight scene written out for Hannibal, but it ended up lost. I hate writing fights, and I'm not good at them, so it was discouraging and I dreaded having to do it again. That's why it's so brief, here. I'm not entirely pleased with this chapter, but I got it done so I can get on with the rest of the story.

Thanks for reading. <3

51

Will didn't have time to react to this revelation about Hannibal. They had to get out of here.

Will rushed forward and clamped his teeth into the fabric of Hannibal's jacket, picking him up much like a kitten by their scruff. He didn't have time for Hannibal to run on his little human legs, and he didn't have time to worry about ruining his suit. Hannibal would have to complain later.

Will would have something to say right back at him.

Will turned and ran out of the room, winding through the halls of the labyrinthine mansion. He growled if anyone stood in his way, and it frightened most of the men enough they didn't dare fight.

Will had heard Mason walk by the door to the basement, and he had used that as his moment to escape. He had broken out and taken Mason in his teeth, careful not to kill him just yet. He had taken him out of the mansion and left Mason where he could come get him once he had Hannibal. Mason had been unconscious, and Will knew he wouldn't stay that way for long. They would have to hurry to that place. Hannibal could help Will make sure he suffered for everything he had done.

Mark was free as well, in theory. Will had broken his chain for him. If he was clever enough, he would get out of here on his own. Will couldn't worry about him anymore.

At last, Will found an exterior door and broke out into the sunlight. He huffed and cleared his senses of the Verger estate. He looked up at the sky, doing some mental calculations and figuring out which direction he had left Mason in.

Will carried Hannibal that way until they found the unconscious man, and would not apologize for it. Hannibal had been lying, and Will was angry with him. But he needed Hannibal for now, so that discussion would have to wait.

"That was quite undignified, if you must know," Hannibal said, though he honestly wasn't all that upset by it. His suit had been ruined by blood long before Will's teeth had rent the fabric.

It had been thrilling, to travel at such speeds without feeling secured in place as he would in a vehicle. Will had outrun most cars on his journey to Hannibal's home, and Hannibal had trusted him entirely despite the danger.

They had more pressing issues, at the moment, though Hannibal was content to have a moment before they spoke of it.

Will chuffed, shaking his fur before changing back to his human form. Despite being entirely bare and without clothes, he didn't show a bit of shame.

“Well, I wasn’t too concerned by your comfort in the moment,” Will said, “I was a bit miffed to find out that my boyfriend didn’t actually need me to save him, not to mention realizing he’s the serial killer I’ve been chasing. You can imagine, I’m sure.”

Hannibal shrugged off his jacket, observing the marks left by Will’s teeth. Though he wouldn’t be able to wear it again, he thought he would keep it. He found it somewhat poetic, the way it had been changed by the violent affections of the beast.

“I’m sure I can,” Hannibal agreed, “It must have been quite a shock, though I think not an entirely unpleasant one. Would you like to borrow some clothes?”

Will growled lowly, but not loudly.

“You bastard. You’ve been enjoying it, seeing me obsess over the Ripper case. When were you going to tell me?”

Hannibal hummed as he considered it, heading to the bedroom with Will in tow. Despite being the leader in the moment, Hannibal did not feel as if he was in any way in charge. He was far too aware that Will had the advantage.

“I had hoped to offer you Bruce Reeves on a platter,” he mused, “That would have been the perfect moment, in my mind.”

Hannibal watched Will carefully for a reaction, and did see his tail give a single swish at his words, one of Will’s ears flicking with interest. That pleased him, though he knew Will would be quite capable of denying his own reaction.

“And what would you have done, if we had gotten there and I had rejected you?” Will asked, taking the clothes Hannibal offered mechanically, as if he was mostly unaware of the action and only concerned with the conversation.

Hannibal shrugged.

“I would have crossed that bridge when I came to it,” he said, “Though I highly doubt you would have rejected me if I had managed to plate Bruce Reeves properly. You have revealed too much of your hand already for any rejection at that time to be believable. I know how you adore the work I have offered you already.”

Will growled again, surprising Hannibal by pushing him up against the wall. He had gotten dressed remarkably quickly, and Hannibal had been distracted choosing clothes for himself. Will held him firm, his deceptive strength keeping Hannibal from moving at all. He looked vicious and glorious, and Hannibal had no idea what to expect from him now.

“You are not in charge anymore, Hannibal,” Will said, his tone low and dangerous, “you need to stop acting like you’re so much better than everyone else. You’ve been manipulating everyone around you all this time, including me. It stops now. No more games with me, Hannibal. I *own* you.”

Hannibal bared his own teeth in response to those words, but he didn't offer an argument. He recognized that this was fueled by Will anger at being made to feel foolish. He felt as if Hannibal hadn't believed he was smart enough to see the truth. While that was not the truth, there would be no convincing him of that in this moment. Hannibal had to accept the terms he set and work from there.

"Very well," he said tensely, "what would you have me do?"

Will let Hannibal go, retreating to watch Hannibal dress in undamaged clothes. There was a dark danger in Will's eyes, even as he was getting what he asked for. There was a hunger that had yet to be sated.

"I want to kill Mason Verger," Will said.

Hannibal nodded. The man lay in the basement, awaiting Will's wrath. Hannibal had been surprised Will hadn't killed him outright in the mansion, though he supposed Will had a reason.

"As do I. He has been rather rude, don't you think?"

Will growled again, apparently unsatisfied with Hannibal's response.

"You know it's not that simple, right?" Will demanded, pacing a bit without taking his eyes off of Hannibal, "if he dies now, the estate gets donated to the organization Bruce Reeves established, the one Martha Meyers was a member of. It's a huge organization, and they're getting more political power all the time. I can't afford to let them get the Verger money. So, you have to help me keep it from them."

Hannibal frowned.

The only way to be sure that didn't happen was for Margot Verger to produce an heir, before Mason was declared dead.

That would require a lot of risks. The kind Hannibal always tried to avoid.

"That will make things far more delicate," Hannibal mused, "Though I will be pleased for Margot to keep her life. She has done nothing to earn my ire."

Will continued to pace, agitated.

"With Mason removed from her life, do you think she can do what she has to?" Will asked, "could we convince her to work with us?"

Hannibal smiled.

"I will invite her to dinner," he said, "I expect her to be far more amenable than you might think."

Will nodded, and his shoulders sagged. He looked exhausted. He had bruises and abrasions from being chained up by Mason, and he was no doubt tired. Hannibal ached to care for him,

but he didn't know if he would be allowed.

"Good. Let's do that," Will said, dropping into a chair, "but we can deal with it later. Right now I want to sleep."

Hannibal moved toward Will, deciding it was worth the risk.

"Allow me to see to your injuries," he requested, and Will opened his eyes to look up at him.

"I would understand if you decide to kill me," Will said, "I'm a danger to you, and I've already told you I'm not just going to roll over. I'm not going to let you be in charge again."

Hannibal petted through Will's hair, finding flakes of dried blood came fluttering off as he did.

"I would not kill you, Will," he said, "I love you, as inconvenient as that is for me."

Will huffed a laugh and closed his eyes again, allowing Hannibal to do what he would.

"I don't know if you're capable of love," he muttered softly.

That hurt Hannibal, the words striking him deeper than he would have expected. He just sighed and retrieved his medical kit, resigning to the fact that he would have to convince Will again.

It was yet to be seen if Mason's meddling had been a good or bad thing in the long run. Only time would tell.

52

It was strange to be back at the office after everything. Will felt like it had been such a long time since they had actually been here, seeing patients. He felt as if he was an entirely different person. But Hannibal's patients didn't seem to have much of an idea that anything had happened, aside from what had been online. They had the courtesy not to mention it during their short interactions with him.

All but one.

"How are you feeling, Will? I heard you went through some pretty rough stuff. But Doctor Lecter was there to help you through it, thank goodness. I hope you're feeling better."

Will offered his best polite smile, uncomfortable with the amount Franklyn seemed to want to talk about what had happened to him recently.

Franklyn had shown interest in Will before, curious about him because he was a manifest, but he had managed to keep that mostly to himself until now. Now, because he saw Will as not only a celebrity werewolf, but also someone close to Hannibal, he couldn't stop himself. Franklyn so desperately wanted to be a part of things, to touch greatness. This made him clutch fervently at anyone who came near to him that he considered great or potentially great. He fantasized about what the world could be if he were friends with celebrities.

Will usually tried to be as kind and polite as possible with the patients, no matter what they acted like. Franklyn made this particularly difficult.

"I am feeling better," Will said lightly, "Doctor Lecter and I apologize for our absence, and hope it wasn't terribly inconvenient for you."

Franklyn just continued to smile.

"Oh, not at all," he said, "I was just worried about you. The way people were gathering outside that hospital, it must have been terrifying."

Will had to refrain from heaving a sigh, Franklyn's interest unwelcome even as well intentioned as he likely believed it to be. Will had an idea Franklyn would have been one of the crowd, had be been born a wolf of any kind. Franklyn wished he could claim that as part of his identity, one thing that he could say biologically made him special in any way.

But Franklyn wasn't a wolf, and his interest in Will was not the same as those from the mob outside the hospital. He was different, and in some ways worse.

"Thank you for your concern, Mr. Froideveaux," Will offered politely, "I'm doing just fine. If you would be so kind as to take a seat while you wait for your appointment, I have some work to catch up on."

Franklyn's eyes grew wide and he nodded.

“Oh, of course,” he said, “after being gone for so long, I’m sure you do. I’ll leave you to it.”

Will smiled, but he wanted to grimace. The idea that things had just been stacking up and no one had been taking care of things during their absence was slightly insulting, if he was honest with himself. Neither he nor Hannibal would have allowed that to happen, even with everything that had been going on. But he didn’t want Franklyn to think he wanted to have a conversation, so he just shut his mouth and got back to work.

Margot was one of the patients today, and Will had already confirmed with her that she would be there, despite all the chaos at the estate. He had an idea it was because she knew very well who had caused all of it, and she was curious to see what they intended to do about it.

Hannibal would invite her to dinner during their session. At dinner, he and Will would offer to help her, in return for her help. It was really a business meeting, of sorts, and Will was anxious about it.

It didn’t help that Hannibal was being so careful with him.

The gentle touches and soft words would have been nice, if Will didn’t know they came from a monster. If he wasn’t always questioning if such things could be trusted, given their source. If he wasn’t always waiting for those hands to turn violent and painful against his flesh, to strike him just as all the others he had met, to claw at him with that eagerness to possess.

Hannibal must have known. Will had confided in him about so much of his past and the reasons he didn’t naturally trust people. Will had set boundaries. Hannibal had to have known that this lie would shake the foundations of their relationship. It could have gotten them both killed, or put in jail. It could have driven Will to kill him. Might still. Hannibal had to have known this would be bad, and dangerous.

So why had he done it? Why had he let them fall into such an easy and comfortable relationship? Why had he made Will so happy with the way things were, before he was going to tell Will it had all been built on a lie?

Will refused to believe it was entirely because Hannibal had just “fallen in love” with him. That was bullshit. Someone like the Chesapeake Ripper didn’t fall in love that easy. If anything, Will was probably just Hannibal’s favorite toy right now.

The door opened, and Hannibal stood there, waiting for his patient.

Will stood, grinning brightly.

“Mr Froideveaux, you’re up,” Will said, waving him over, then turning to Hannibal, “He’s all yours, Doctor Lecter.”

Hannibal smiled, but Will could see it was slightly pained. He didn’t like to see Will putting on the mask anymore. He used to find it so amusing when Will would pretend to be bright and happy for people, or when he would pretend to be helpless when dealing with Jack. Hannibal didn’t like his acting anymore.

Probably because Will didn't drop it when they were alone anymore.

Hannibal took Franklyn into the office, clearly less than enthused about the hour ahead of him. Will didn't feel any sympathy, just waving pleasantly as the door was closed.

The phone rang, making Will jump. Today, the sound of the phone was sharp and painful to his sensitive ears. He wished he wouldn't have to answer it.

"Doctor Lecter's office, this is Will Graham speaking."

"Will."

Will closed his eyes, steeling himself for whatever it was Jack wanted. It had better not be another Ripper killing. If it was, Will would kill Hannibal himself.

"Agent Crawford," Will said, putting on his best customer service voice, soulless and patronizing as possible, "What ever can I do to help you today? I'm afraid Doctor Lecter is busy at the moment, but I would be happy to take a message."

Jack made a gruff sound of displeasure.

"I was actually looking for you, Will," Jack said, "I would like your help with another murder. Lecter already knows about it. I sent the file with him. I was wondering if you could offer any additional insight."

Will almost laughed. Not another Ripper kill. The same one. The one Will had adored so much, and Hannibal had sent his thoughts to Jack pretending Will had never seen the photos. This would have been funny if it wasn't so damn stupid.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to do that, Agent Crawford," he said, "On the advice of Doctor Lecter, I'm taking a break from all things murder, and focusing on gaining experience in the more domestic side of psychology. If there's nothing else, I'm afraid I have some work to do, and I'll have to let you go."

"Will," Jack said angrily, though he was clearly trying to keep his voice calm, "I've been hearing rumors, and I need to know if there's any truth to them."

Will sighed.

"Alright then," he said, "ask."

"I heard you got involved with the Vergers," Jack said, "something big went down on the estate, and your names came up. I need to know what happened, if you were a part of it."

Will rubbed at his brow, feeling a headache coming on. And he couldn't blame it on the encephalitis this time. It was just stress. Stress and Jack Crawford's voice.

"Margot Verger is one of Doctor Lecter's patients, but without a warrant I'm afraid I can't tell you anything else. Even that was a breach of doctor patient confidentiality, but you've been

so gracious to Doctor Lecter and I that I thought you deserved a little help. Unless you have a warrant, I'm afraid I really can't help you any more."

Jack sighed heavily.

"Fine. But this isn't over, Will," he said, "I get the feeling you're hiding something from me. I will find out."

Will smiled bitterly.

"Goodbye, Agent Crawford."

Will hung up the phone and let out a soft growl.

Jack was going to get himself killed, either by Will's hands or Hannibal's most likely. He just didn't know how to mind his own business. Will supposed that was an occupational hazard. Side effect of being FBI. Professional busybody.

Will got up and paced, growling softly. His ears pressed flat against his head.

He hated all of this. He didn't want to be wrapped up in all this bullshit. An obsessed serial killer who was also his boss and romantic partner. An FBI agent who could tell things weren't entirely how they should be. The heir to an empire in the basement awaiting their decision on how to deal with him. Mason's sister on her way to another therapy session, soon to help them decide. The beginnings of a cult starting to form around Will's very existence.

Everything was so goddamn complicated. And Will didn't even know if any of it was worth it. What would he gain at the end?

All he'd gotten so far was encephalitis and a new scar.

Will sighed, running his hands through his hair.

Welcome to Hell, boy. The wait is torture.

53

“What exactly are you proposing, Doctor Lecter?” Margot asked, too smart to be the first one to put voice to the plan to kill Mason.

Hannibal was being likewise coy, meaning Will was the one who would have to finally just say it. He was annoyed that Hannibal couldn’t just drop the act and say what he meant. Hannibal was upset with how much Will acted these days, but he was so much worse and would never admit it.

“He wanted you to choose what we would do with your brother,” Will said curtly, “and I think you should know that we both intend for him to die at the end of this. I think he could still be of some use to you, if you want to keep the estate. But it’s up to you.”

Margot turned to look at Will, her gaze cold and sharp. She was not someone to trifle with, under normal circumstances. Will was undaunted as he continued to eat, not concerned with whether he might be seen as rude or not.

“And what service do you suppose my brother could be to me?” Margot asked.

Will raised an eyebrow and one of his ears flicked.

“You’re intelligent enough to know what I mean by that,” he said, “And I’m really not in the mood to spell everything out for you. If you want to have this verbal dance with Doctor Lecter, be my guest. I just wanted to move things along.”

Hannibal smiled proudly, as if he could claim Will’s actions as his own. Will resented that. After everything Hannibal had done, that Will had let him do, asked him to do, Hannibal had no right claiming Will’s actions as his own in that way. He had no right to be pleased with how Will acted.

Margot silently studied Will for a moment before she smiled lightly and turned back to Hannibal.

“Alright. If I find someone who’s willing to carry my brother’s child, what is it you want from me in return for this favor? I’m not naive enough to expect something for nothing.”

Hannibal nodded.

“Of course. As we have already become somewhat involved in your affairs, all I would ask is that you help us not face the legal consequences of what has happened. I’m sure you are aware we acted only in self defense, but the FBI is unlikely to see it that way. We must be able to explain Mason’s sudden disappearance, or death if that is what you want the narrative to be. I will leave that to your discretion.”

Margot set down her fork and folded her hands in her lap. Her plate was not clean yet, but Will could tell she was done eating. It wasn’t because she didn’t like Hannibal’s food, god

forbid, but just that she didn't feel comfortable in their company and the conversation was doing little to put her at ease.

"I'll need some time to think about it," she said.

Hannibal nodded easily, though Will felt a spike of annoyance. She should have already thought of all of this before coming here tonight. It wasn't exactly convenient for them to keep Mason in the basement like some messed up pet. He wanted to get rid of him as quickly as possible. He hoped Hannibal wouldn't be too lenient.

Hannibal didn't push the matter, and Margot was soon gone. Will took his dishes to the kitchen and left them there, going to the study to be alone until Hannibal was done cleaning up.

Will was already getting tired of all of this. He wasn't good at holding grudges, if he was honest with himself. He had never been good at it. People had always tried to convince him it was a good thing, but he didn't feel that way. If he liked someone, almost nothing they could do would change how he felt. Even learning that Hannibal was the Chesapeake Ripper didn't change how he felt.

But Hannibal wouldn't learn his lesson if Will just forgave him immediately. He wouldn't change his habits.

Things were too complicated, and Will was angry with himself for letting it be that way. Things should have been simple. When you find out someone is a serial killer, you tell the cops. That's simple. But Will hadn't, and he wouldn't, and he didn't want to. He was now allied with that serial killer, and he couldn't picture a future where he betrayed Hannibal.

Will paced around the study, agitated and uneasy. He wished for so many things. But he wouldn't get them.

Eventually, Will growled lowly, making a decision on a whim. Things just felt easier when he was in one of his canine forms.

Will stripped off his clothes, folding them all neatly so as to not upset Hannibal, and shifted. Unlike the last time he had shifted in Hannibal's home, he didn't limit himself by staying in his domestic form. While it would be cumbersome to move around in the house in his full wolf form, he needed the feeling of his true self.

When he had shifted, Will felt leagues better. He felt like he could breathe easier that way. Something in his soul settled, and he just felt at ease.

Will curled up by the fire, feeling comfortable there, and waited for Hannibal.

Eventually, he heard Hannibal's steps approaching the study, and he could smell the man coming. Hannibal sounded almost hesitant, as if he wasn't sure what to expect from Will tonight. Will supposed that was fair, all things considered. He had been hard on Hannibal this last while, and he knew Hannibal had already found him unpredictable. It must have been fraying Hannibal's nerves just as much as it had been Will's.

When Hannibal opened the door, Will heard his breath catch, and he stopped at once. Will lifted his head to look, and saw Hannibal staring at him in wonder.

Though it had not been all that long since Hannibal had last seen Will in this form, Will had been careful not to shift when they were together since the Verger estate. Like the way he had been acting, hiding his true feelings, he had been hiding this side of himself as well. Maybe Hannibal had worried he would never be allowed this again.

At the sight of Hannibal, Will's tail thumped against the rug despite himself. He couldn't help it. He did love Hannibal, even though he had been lying.

Hannibal looked to Will questioningly, not daring to come closer if that was not what Will wanted. He believed he was in a delicate situation, and had to tread softly to keep from awakening the beast again.

Will huffed and shifted, laying his head down on his paws and looking up at Hannibal. His tail continued to swish back and forth, and he made a soft rumbling sound. He hoped Hannibal would understand it as an invitation, and eventually he did.

Slowly, Hannibal stepped forward. He hadn't put his jacket back on since cleaning up after dinner, and his sleeves were still rolled up. Will had seen him looking more casual than that before, but it was like some sort of reset had taken place, and each of these was a hesitant new milestone.

Hannibal knelt on the rug beside Will and reached out, slowly beginning to stroke a hand over Will's fur. Will huffed again, pleased. Things felt so much simpler when he didn't have to talk. When he was a wolf.

After a minute of this, Will lifted his head, using it to pull Hannibal closer until he understood what it was Will wanted from him. With a huff of his own, Hannibal settled into Will's side so they were curled up together.

"Do you forgive me, then?" Hannibal asked softly.

Will nudged Hannibal with his nose sharply, but licked at his neck in confirmation. Hannibal smiled and resume petting Will reverently.

"I do apologize for lying to you, Will," he said, "I did not want it to hurt you."

Will closed his eyes, feeling worlds better now that he had Hannibal there, pressed into him and sharing warmth with him. Hannibal always managed to make things better.

Will loved him, as dangerous as that truth was. He loved the Chesapeake Ripper.

"I do truly love you, Will," Hannibal said, a sentiment he seemed set on convincing Will of. Will believed him, which made everything see simpler, even though he knew it was all going to be hard to get through. With Hannibal, it felt easier.

Will pressed his face to Hannibal's chest, breathing in the scent of him deeply. He had liked the way Hannibal smelled from the first time they met, and since then it had become one of

the few things he could rely on to make him feel better almost always. He wished he could make the whole word disappear so he could live in this moment, with just Hannibal and himself.

As if reading his mind, Hannibal leaned in close and spoke softly by Will's ear.

"I could take you away, Will. Somewhere with water, where you can run as you please, and you need not fear anything. No one can shackle you with responsibility, and I would keep you safe. We can leave this place and make a new one for ourselves."

Will's heart ached with want. He wanted so badly to go with Hannibal, to find somewhere just for them. Away from where all this hurt had been done, and where Will was still the subject of so much obsessive attention. He wanted to get away from the public eyes, and just be alone with Hannibal.

But could he really do that? After everything he had told Mark about being an example, showing the world that wolves could be good. Showing courage and standing for something he believed in. If Will ran away now, gave it all up and gave in to all his violent desires, was he any better than all the people like Bruce Reeves said he was? He would just be letting them win.

But he was so tired of fighting. He was tired of holding back, pretending he was something other than what he was.

Hannibal had once asked him if he ever got tired of being better than everyone else. Right now, the answer was yes. He was tired of living up to an impossible standard.

"I know you are too noble to accept such an offer without giving it much thought," Hannibal said softly, "You have taken so much onto your shoulders you may not be sure how to put it down. If you will permit, I would help you."

Will sighed. He didn't want to have to make any decisions right now. He just wanted to sit there with Hannibal and pretend everything was right in the world. He didn't want to worry about tomorrow.

Hannibal seemed to understand, as he always did, and didn't say anything else, letting Will doze as they soaked in the comfort of each other.

Whatever the future held, they wouldn't be separated. For better or worse, they were conjoined. Will didn't know if either of them would survive separation.

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